

THE GREAT DIVIDE

JAMES J. TYNAN

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A Metro-Goldwyn Picture.

The Great Divide.

"THERE'S ONE THING YOU CAN'T TAKE FROM ME—THAT'S
THE MAN YOU'VE MADE OF ME."

THE GREAT DIVIDE

BY
JAMES J. TYNAN

A NOVELIZED VERSION
OF THE PHOTOPLAY

ILLUSTRATED WITH SCENES
FROM THE PHOTOPLAY
A METRO-GOLDWYN PICTURE



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To
HENRY MILLER AND MARGARET ANGLIN

—THE ORIGINAL
STEPHEN GHENT AND RUTH JORDAN -
THIS VOLUME IS
RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED.

JAMES J. TYNAN.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

CHAPTER I

PHILIP JORDAN, the first of his name to settle in Massachusetts—he who came to Milford Corners in 1698, before Milford Corners was known by that or any other name—was a gruff, hardy individual. Strong-willed, even at times violent, yet godly withal and a man who, once having given his word for good or ill, fulfilled his promise to the letter.

A lover of freedom and the open country was Philip Jordan. Therefore, when the seacoast settlement in which he first had taken up his habitation grew beyond the bounds of reason, even to a community of eighty families, Philip packed his wife, Ruth, their eight children and all of their gear into ox-carts and, with Hezekiah Milford, Charity, his wife, and their family, started for the back country where things were not so crowded.

In course of time other families came and cleared land—not in sufficient numbers to inconvenience Philip Jordan, but enough to make advisable some form of civic organization and a community name.

Then there arose a dispute between Philip Jordan and Hezekiah Milford as to which of these pioneers should name the settlement and it was Philip who, against all of the narrow religious teaching of the time and region, proposed to leave the matter to chance—in effect, to gamble for it.

Philip's vehemence carried his proposal over the shocked objections of the other settlers. Accordingly, his wife Ruth, somewhat shamefacedly drew from the unwilling hand of Charity Milford the shorter of two twigs, thus giving the choice to Hezekiah. He, being by no means unwilling to accept success even when achieved by such questionable means, promptly named the settlement Milford Corners.

So it is called to-day, although the Milford stock long since has disappeared. It is a leisurely little village, with life centering around the combination general store and postoffice, the railroad station, with its two trains a day,

the school and the church for which the first Philip Jordan gave the land and the logs of which the original structure was built, directly opposite his own cabin.

A road now runs between the church and the house. The former log meeting-house has given place to the typical New England clap-boarded church with open belfry and elm-shaded churchyard, and on the site of the Jordan cabin stands the somewhat pretentious house built by the fourth Philip.

For the Jordans still are a part of Milford Corners and the house and lands have descended in direct line. A hardy race of strong-willed, upright men and splendid, capable women in whom the pioneering spirit and fiery nature of the first Philip, although somewhat subdued by the influence of community life as time went on, nevertheless were merely dormant.

The one trait of the first Philip which neither time nor environment have in any way influenced, is the unswerving regard for the promise given. "As sure as a Jordan's word" is the ultimate affirmation of the countryside.

CHAPTER II

It is Sunday, always a great day in Milford Corners. It is not so much the first day of the week as the culmination of a period of work and, on the part of the women at least, semi-seclusion in their own homes, where household cares and the demands of husbands and children provide a round of toil which Wednesday evening prayer meeting seems only to make more monotonous.

On Sundays, however, everybody, fresh from Saturday night baths, borne with as a matter of duty or habit by the grown-ups and under compulsion, frequently painful, by the children, dons his or her best clothes and goes to church. Everybody, that is, except old Bill Hopkins, the official village loafer, and Silas Gregg, who drives a dilapidated flivver dray and is at once the Milford Corners taxi service, express company and truckman. A rough man is Silas, with a facile gift of profanity which years of association, first with mules and later with the

flivver, have developed to a point that is the despair of the Rev. Calvin Jenkins, the pastor, and the envy of every small boy in the village.

Bill Hopkins gave no reason for not attending church and was expected to give none. In fact, had he appeared at service there would have been created a sensation little short of cataclysmal, for in Milford Corners, church going was more of a social function than a manifestation of Christianity. Silas, however, was wont to excuse his habitual non-attendance on the ground that the Sunday train from the East arrived at Milford Corners soon after the close of the morning service and, as Milford Corners' only public utility, it was his business and duty to meet the train. True, nobody ever had arrived at or departed from Milford Corners on any Sunday within his memory, but somebody might do so and it was the business of a strongly adjectived public utility to be ready to render service whenever called on.

To-day, however, the congregation of the First, and only, Presbyterian Church of Milford Corners was treated to a sensation greater even than if Bill Hopkins and Silas Gregg had entered and walked arm-in-arm down the mid-

dle aisle. The Jordan pew was unoccupied. Never before since the first log meeting-house was built on the first Philip Jordan's land, had a service been unattended by members of the Jordan family. It might be that illness or the exigencies of birth or death would cause the absence of one or two Jordans, but here was the whole family absent. The thing was unheard of.

"I've known Marthy Jordan goin' on fifty-two year and this is the first time she hasn't come to church except when Philip and Ruth was born," Mrs. Ezekiel Taylor confided in a whisper to Mrs. Eliphalet Smith in the pew in front of her.

"Waal, Philip and Ruth and 'specially Philip's wife, Polly, air kinder notional and mebbe they've come it over Marthy to kind of backslide," returned Mrs. Smith who never hesitated to jump to conclusions regardless of the distance between fact and fancy.

Whatever the reason, the non-attendance of any Jordan and speculation as to the probable cause thereof were enough to keep Elbert Simmons from his usual nap during the Rev. Mr. Jenkins' sermon which, to-day, appropriately

enough, was based on the parable of the Lost Sheep.

At the conclusion of the service there was not the usual decorum observed in leaving church. Nobody paused to chat with neighbors on the way out. In fact, there was what might well be termed un-Sabbathlike haste toward the door. But before the church was empty, a self-appointed committee of women had been formed to inquire into the reason for the Jordans' lapse.

That something out of the ordinary had occurred to keep the family at home was apparent to the congregation as soon as its members reached the door of the church. There, across the road, in front of the Jordan place, was Silas Gregg's old flivver with Silas beside it, his head under the hood whence came a steady rumble of spoken words which the church members could not distinguish, but of which long association with Silas made it possible for them to judge the purport. On the front porch of the house stood Mrs. Jordan in her usual Sunday black—she had never put off her mourning since her husband had died eight years before—with her arm around her daugh-

ter Ruth. Philip Jordan, her son, was carrying a suitcase in either hand and a bundle under one arm from the house to the waiting flivver and, inside the house, Philip's wife, Polly, could be seen moving hurriedly here and there, apparently gathering up loose ends of traveling gear.

"Waal, if I don't believe they're goin' travelin'," said Mrs. Smith, jumping this time to a perfectly obvious conclusion.

"H'm, they might've said somethin' about it, seems as though," remarked Mrs. Taylor. "Mighty mysterious goin's on, I vum. Travelin' on Sunday, too, as if stayin' home from church wan't enough. I wonder where they're goin'."

"Waal, I aim to find out," said Sallie Hibbett, a spinster through no fault of her own, who, as the next-door neighbor of the Jordans, was considerably incensed that such momentous plans could have not only been formulated but actually put into execution right under her very nose, yet without her knowledge.

She started to cross the road, accompanied by five or six other women of the self-appointed committee of investigation. The other mem-

bers of the congregation waited in the elm-shaded churchyard for the more or less embellished report that they knew would be forthcoming when the committee had finished its prying.

“My goodness, Marthy! What’s goin’ on here?” asked Miss Hibbett, as the group of women approached the Jordan porch. “We missed you in church this mornin’ and thought somethin’ dreadful must’ve happened.”

Mrs. Jordan, still with her arm around her daughter Ruth, smiled down at her neighbors. “I did so dislike to miss service, but there was so much to be done with the young folks going away, I just . . .”

“Goin’ away?” fairly screamed the group.

“Yes,” answered Mrs. Jordan. “Philip, Polly and Ruth are going out West. They are leaving this morning.”

“Out West! This mornin’!” Again the chorus.

“Yes, out to Arizona,” said Mrs. Jordan, by no means failing to enjoy the effect of her announcement on the women, who looked at her and one another in amazement too great for vocal expression.

During this conversation and the rapid-fire of questions that followed it as soon as the committee had recovered its collective breath, Ruth Jordan stood smiling, her arm tight around her mother's waist. To a keen observer, had there been one present, there might have appeared in her smile a certain tinge of cynicism, but to the casual onlooker her expression was merely friendly.

Ruth was considered a "well-favored" girl by Milford Corners which was not given to enthusiasms. Really, she was exceptionally good-looking. About twenty-two, of medium height, slender and well-formed like all of the Jordans. Like the Jordans, too, she had clear blue eyes and a habit of looking straight at one, although with a certain twinkle that denoted a sense of humor. There was also the shapely Jordan mouth and firm chin which indicated that the Jordan integrity was by no means lost in her generation. From her mother she had inherited a clear skin, which no New England heat of summer or cold of winter could tan or roughen, and a wealth of shining golden hair, which now was concealed under a close-fitting hat of dark straw.

Although Ruth had lived all her life in Milford Corners, as had her family for generations, there was that in her which, ever since she was old enough to heed it, had cried out against the narrowness of the village life; a desire for broader fields and a wider outlook which had been intensified by the two years she had spent at the State University—to the feverish agitation of Milford Corners. Possibly it was an outcropping of the pioneering spirit of old Philip Jordan the first, whose portrait hung with others of the family in the comfortable living room of the Jordan home; something of that dislike for crowds and lack of individual thought which caused old Philip to strike out into the wilderness to obtain the freedom for which his nature craved.

From the time she could understand, tradition had been dinned into Ruth's ears. With the exception of the two years spent at college, her life had seemed to be merely a repetition of the lives of other Jordans. There was the assured position in Milford Corners; there was the family home; there were the things which one did or did not do because no member of the family had or had not done them; there

was the income from the place—not as great as it once was, to be sure, but enough for economical people. A well-ordered life, certainly, but constricted.

Often Ruth had wondered, standing before his portrait, what old Philip the first would have said to it all. She could imagine that hardy individual rebelling and again turning his ox-teams away toward the West.

That is what Ruth wanted to do—turn away from it all. She did not care whether she went East or West, North or South, just so she came to open country where the cutting of an infant's tooth, for instance, was of particular interest only to the immediate family of the infant and not to the entire community. She rebelled secretly at the narrowness of life in Milford Corners, but permitted herself to be carried along on its sluggish current until there developed a combination of circumstances which fanned into flame the smoldering unrest, and the resultant conflagration swept away the objections of her mother, her somewhat slower-thinking brother, Philip, and even his ease-loving, rather incapable wife, Polly.

In brief, two successive seasons of poor crops, together with the failure of a company from the stock of which the major part of the Jordan income was derived, had reduced that income to a point where something radical had to be done. Added to this was the fact that the village gossip made the misfortune even worse than it was and Mrs. Eliphalet Smith had ventured to pay a call, ostensibly of condolence but really for the purpose of prying into the situation for the benefit of what Ruth, to her mother's dismay, referred to as the "back-fence chorus."

The whole thing was too much for Ruth's disposition to stand and she speedily announced her intention of leaving the family rooftree, throwing tradition to the four winds and striking out for herself. She invited her mother and Philip and Polly to join in her venture, but informed them that whether they did or not, she was on her way. Just where that way led she did not at the moment know nor did she particularly care. She had no desire to "live her own life" in the sense that the so-called younger generation spoke of that

operation, but she certainly did not intend to permit Milford Corners or any other corners to live her life for her.

Right in the midst of the several days of discussion which followed this revolutionary announcement, came young Winthrop Newbury, son of old Dr. Newbury, the Milford Corners physician. Winthrop had gone out to Arizona immediately after completing his medical training, and had been placed in charge of the hospital of a mining company. Ruth and Win had been schoolmates. He never had made any secret of the fact that he loved her and the principal reason for his return to Milford Corners on his first vacation was to ask her to be his wife.

Ruth gave him no opportunity to do this and he, seeing how the land lay and being of the conviction that propinquity might accomplish what long-distance wooing by mail could not do, proceeded to paint the glories of Arizona and to tell of the opportunities to be found in the growing of cactus. There was, he said, a recently discovered process by which the fiber of this hitherto little regarded desert plant could be extracted and utilized for many use-

ful purposes. So convincingly did Win talk and such a glowing picture did he present of the possibilities of cactus culture on a large scale, that even Philip Jordan was fired with enthusiasm.

Finally it was decided to mortgage some of the Jordan land for sufficient money to keep Mrs. Jordan in comfort while the three younger members of the family set out to find freedom and fortune in the cactus-bearing desert of Arizona.

It was a matter of a few weeks only before the preliminaries of the move were arranged. The funds had been raised, provision had been made for Mrs. Jordan's comfort and a parcel of desert country had been purchased through an Arizona real estate man recommended by Winthrop Newbury. As for Win, his vacation being over, he had returned to his mine hospital, promising to meet Ruth, Philip and Polly on their arrival in Arizona and escort them to their cactus ranch.

Ruth had insisted that they keep the matter to themselves. It was, she argued, their own business and she was sick and tired of having personal matters made community property.

That is why, with the moment of departure at hand, Ruth was standing at her mother's side and smiling a trifle cynically at the open curiosity and thinly-veiled indignation of their neighbors who not unnaturally felt that they had been cheated out of participation in what promised to be the sensation of the year.

Now that all arrangements had been completed and it was a matter only of minutes before Silas Gregg's flivver would bear her away, Ruth was not unwilling that the village should know where and why they were going. Furthermore, she appreciated that her mother would enjoy the little triumph of telling the story and that this would in a measure serve to lighten the grief her mother would feel at the time of departure. Therefore, she remained on the porch with her arm around her mother's waist and smilingly helped her to answer the questions volleyed at them by the neighbors.

They were joined by Philip, who had just deposited the last load of luggage in the waiting flivver, and by his wife, Polly, who came bustling from the house, complacence and self-importance showing in every movement.

Philip was rather slow-going, but, like all of the Jordan men, tall, strong and efficient. His mouth was inclined to droop at the corners and his chin was not so firm as Ruth's. A good man, but lacking in humor and possessing little of the initiative which was an outstanding characteristic of Ruth on whose judgment he had come to depend to a greater degree than was good for him.

Polly Jordan was described by the villagers as "cute" and possibly that description suited her better than any other. She was not a native of Milford Corners. Philip had met her at the university, had married her on Commencement Day and had brought her home to a surprised but none the less warm welcome by his mother and sister. She had no natural aptitude for housekeeping and had shown utter uselessness in emergencies.

She was inclined to be what she was pleased to call "modern," and demonstrated this by reading certain magazines which were regarded by Milford Corners as being rather too broad for home consumption. She knew nothing about Freud or Nietzsche, but she was fond of referring intimately to these writers, well

aware that her hearers knew even less than she.

Hers was the distinction of being the first married woman in Milford Corners to wear silk stockings and exhibit them in public. On her first appearance with her shapely ankles thus clad, certain women of the village were scandalized to the point of predicting that she would come to a bad end. The male members of the community held no such pessimistic view and it is of record that on his return from his next trip to the city after seeing Polly's silk-clad ankles, Abel Hulbert brought his wife a pair of silk stockings which, despite an inordinate longing, she had not yet dared to wear outside her own home.

Yes, Polly was undeniably "cute" and Ruth understood and liked her. Also, Polly liked Ruth although she had no gift of understanding and was at times inclined to resent Ruth's influence over Philip.

Polly had been opposed to the Arizona venture. Here in Milford Corners, life was serene. Mother Jordan, Ruth and old Hannah did almost all of the housework, leaving Polly practically free to enjoy herself. She knew nothing

about Arizona and she foresaw trouble and discomfort. For a time, her opposition had been supported by Philip, but when Winthrop Newbury's glowing descriptions and Ruth's persuasions finally won over her slower-thinking husband, Polly found herself the sole opposing element and, as a last resort, brought tears to her aid.

Usually this maneuver was successful. This time, however, Polly found that weeping not only brought her no sympathy, but actually made Philip angry. She therefore accepted the inevitable with apparent good grace but with serious misgivings.

Now that the time had arrived, the misgivings were lost in the excitement of departure. Also she had an audience. She was, therefore, all animation and, taking the conversation bodily from Mrs. Jordan and Ruth, gave the neighbors a glowing description of the wonders of Arizona, the fabulous profits of cactus cultivation and the beauties of the Spanish hacienda in which they were to live.

She exhibited a colored photograph of the house which the Arizona real estate man had sent to Philip. It showed a low, rambling,

adobe structure, vine-grown and with flowers blooming on all sides. "It will be a delightful place in which to entertain," she told Miss Hibbett. "One of the customs of that part of the country is for the ranch owners to invite the neighbors from miles around to entertainments, fiestas, they are called—that last for a whole week. Of course, as newcomers, we shall be entertained a great deal and will have to do considerable entertaining ourselves."

Miss Hibbett was properly impressed and took the picture for a closer inspection. "It's beautiful," she said. "Who's that settin' there by the gate?"

"That" was a man dressed in Mexican costume, sprawled on a bench, strumming a guitar. The picture was not at all clear and the little splotch of color which indicated the man by the gate, could have been almost anything. It was uncharitably said of Miss Hibbett, however, that she could "spot a man" farther away than most people could see a drove of cattle. There was also a libel to the effect that she looked under her bed every night in the hope of finding even a male burglar; this notwithstanding the fact that Milford

Corners never had suffered a robbery save on those occasions when Bill Hopkins, driven by absolute necessity to providing sustenance, unlawfully acquired a few eggs or, maybe, a chicken from somebody's hen house.

"Oh, that," replied Polly, recovering the picture. "That must be one of the help. You know, it is necessary to have lots of help on a big ranch like ours and on holidays in Arizona, it is customary for the men to put on fancy clothes and serenade the ranch owners. It's very picturesque, isn't it?"

Philip listened to the chatter with growing impatience. Finally, looking at his watch, he said: "Sorry to break up the party, ladies, but it's nearly train-time. Come, Polly, make it snappy, my dear, or all of the help will desert the ranch before we get there."

"Good-by, mother, dear," said Ruth, taking Mrs. Jordan in both arms and kissing her tenderly. "Now, you're not to worry at all. We are all grown up, free, white and twenty-one and none of us ever is sick. I'll write every day and I'll see that Philip writes at least once a week. I can't promise for Polly, but I'll do my best.

“There, now, don’t cry, dear,” she continued as Mrs. Jordan made a brave but vain attempt to keep back the tears. “Everything will come out all right.”

“Come, Ruth,” called Philip, who had kissed his mother good-by and gone out to the flivver. “We’ve got only eight minutes to make the train and Heaven knows if this wreck of Silas’ will stand up for the trip.”

Silas began a profanely emphatic defense of his flivver, but was cut short by the arrival of Ruth and Polly, who climbed into the back seat with most of the luggage, while Philip sat in front with Silas. With a creaking of springs, banging of exhaust and knocking of cylinders, the asthmatic flivver got under way, the girls waving their handkerchiefs and Philip his hat in farewell to Mrs. Jordan and the women on the porch, and again to the group under the trees in the churchyard, still waiting for the committee to return and tell them what all the excitement was about.

On the train which was to bear them on the first leg of their long journey, Polly and Philip sat together. There was a vacant seat imme-

diately in front of them, but Ruth did not take it.

Instead she sat by herself several seats away. She wanted to be alone and to think. She was free; already she was out of the narrowness of Milford Corners and bent on a great adventure. She was sorry to leave her mother, of course. They would miss each other. But she was going to open country, pioneering in a new industry, to sink or swim as her own efforts decided. She had no illusions about her part in the enterprise. Polly, she knew, would be useless, if not, indeed, a burden. Philip was thoroughly dependable and would be a great help, of course. But the success or failure of the venture would depend solely upon her—Ruth Jordan. Well—it would be a success.

Before her half-closed eyes came a vision of the Milford Corners living room and old Philip Jordan the first looking down at her from his portrait with a twinkle of amusement in his blue eyes and a faint smile of understanding on his firm lips.

CHAPTER III

"NUMBER 6 on time, Jed?" inquired Long Ed Thompson, as he swung his lean frame from the back of his pinto horse to the platform of the little station that housed all of the affairs of the Santa Fé Railroad in Red Mesa, Arizona.

Jed Patton, station master, telegraph operator, ticket agent, baggage master, freight agent and station porter, opened his eyes, looked lazily at the speaker, aimed a stream of tobacco juice at a lizard sunning itself on the station platform, scored a bull's eye and replied:

"Yep, but what's it to yuh? Did yuh come over to see her run by?"

"Nope," answered Long Ed. "I come t' meet a bunch o' folks from the East some'rs. Tenderfeet what's gone an' bought the ol' Perkins ranch over back o' Mesa Grande."

It was then that Patton looked out back of the station and saw that, in addition to his own

pinto, Long Ed had three saddled horses and two pack mules hitched to the rack near the water tank.

“Who be they?” he inquired.

“Dunno eggsactly. This here real estate feller, Burke, over to Florence, hired me to kinder look after ‘em an’ see they didn’t no harm come to ‘em. He figgered they’d be two ladies an’ a man, brother to one an’ married to t’other.” And Long Ed squinted down the track for a sign of Number 6.

At the mention of ladies, Jed Patton unconsciously reached for his necktie to see that the little black bow was properly in place, but his fingers touched merely the empty space around his collar button.

Turning in time to see this display of masculine vanity, Long Ed volunteered: “If it’s that there greasy hunk o’ black cloth yer lookin’ fer, she’s there yonder on the platform.”

Overlooking this injurious remark for the moment, Jed hastened to recover his only piece of neckwear, a ready-made bow tie, purchased two years before from an itinerant peddler who had been dropped off a train on which he

was attempting to travel without a ticket. Having hung the little wire loop over his collar button and patted the tie into place, Jed gave his attention to the necessary "come-back" to Long Ed's slur.

"Waal, it may be a hunk o' black cloth, an' it mebbe is greasy," he admitted, "but if yuh ask me, it's a damn sight more attractive than that there two-pound Adam's apple o' yourn, wabblin' up an' down ever' time yuh chaw. Why don't yuh wash yer neck oncet in awhile, too, yuh ornery ol' horn toad?"

Then, resuming his official position as representative of a great railroad system, and before Long Ed had time to resent his somewhat personal remarks, Jed asked:

"What d'yuh expect these here tenderfeet air goin' tuh do out here? Can't raise nothin' on that ol' Perkins place but cactus and what in hell cactus is good fer I do' know."

"Waal, that's jest what they're goin' tuh raise," replied Long Ed. "It pears like somebody has gone an' figgered out a way tuh make things outer the dern stuff, so these here folks is goin' tuh raise it. That's what the Florence real estate party told me, anyhow."

“Raise cactus!” ejaculated Jed. “Don’t seem no sense to it. Why, what the dickens do they wanter *raise* it fer? The darn stuff just grows here and ain’t nobody ever planted none yet, fur as I can see. If yuh’d a said they was goin’ tuh pick it, I might ’a believed yuh, but yuh can’t put it over me that anybody that ain’t plumb crazy would come way out here tuh raise somethin’ we ain’t got nothin’ else but.” And Jed waved a hand at the surrounding desert, where cactus of all varieties, shapes and sizes was growing in abundance.

Long Ed grinned and said: “Waal, if anybody’s a liar, it’s the real estate feller over to Florence. That’s what he tells me an’ as long as they pay me fer the hosses an’ fer my time a-guidin’ ’em, I ain’t worryin’ none if they wanter raise horned toads an’ rattlers.”

“Waal, it’s mighty queer, if yuh ask me,” replied Jed, as he took a heavy silver watch from his pocket and looked at the time. Then he thumbed the crystal as he mentally calculated just where Number 6 ought to be at that minute.

“She oughter be comin’ along mighty soon,

now," he said. "But who's this bird lopin' up on the bay hoss?"

"This bird" was a young man, clean shaven and with his face, hands and neck burned to a brick red by the desert sun. He was dressed in khaki shirt and breeches which showed signs of wear, heavy boots laced halfway up his calves, and a gray Stetson hat with a stamped leather band. The most striking part of his attire, however, was a gay, red and purple striped cravat. He sat well on his wiry brown pony, but Long Ed, the plainsman, could see at a glance that he was not one whose days were spent in the saddle. Jed had eyes for nothing but that wonderful tie.

The newcomer pulled up at the hitching rack, dismounted and tied his horse. Then, coming up on the platform, he inquired:

"Can either of you gentlemen tell me if the train from the East is on time?"

"Ain't had no word different," replied Jed. "Expectin' somebody on her?"

"Yes, some friends of mine from the East are coming out here to settle, so I rode over to meet them. I'm Doctor Newbury of the Boston and Arizona Mining Company just outside

of Mesa Grande," the young man volunteered.

"I've heard tell o' yuh," Long Ed broke in. "You're the feller that crawled inter that cave-in last week an' yanked out Jake Billings before the hull works c'lapsed. I'm sayin' you're all right, doc. Jake's my buddy."

"Oh, there wasn't any danger for me," Win Newbury replied. "And Jake is doing fine."

"I know about Jake," said Long Ed. "But about the danger—the boys over to Mesa Grande tell it different."

"About these here Eastern friends o' yours," Long Ed went on. "Air they the bunch o' tenderfeet that's comin' out here tuh raise cactus on the ol' Perkins ranch? If they air, I'm here tuh meet 'em an' take 'em in."

"That'll be great," said Win. "We all come from the same town back East and I am partly responsible for their coming out here. I was a little shaky about my ability as a guide, however, so I'm glad you came along."

During all of this talk, Jed had been a listener and he did not relish it. Visitors to the lonely little station were few and far between and usually Jed took advantage of such opportunities to unload a stream of pent-up conver-

sation. Now, however, there was a chance to break in and he was prompt to avail himself of it.

"Yuh say yuh got these here folks to come out here to raise cactus? Fer Gawd's sake, what does anybody wanter raise the damn stuff fer? It ain't good fer nothin' an' besides it don't need no raisin'. It just grows." And again he waved toward the desert.

"Yes, I know," Win replied. "But there's a new process of extracting the fiber from cactus and making things out of it. A great deal of cactus will be needed and the closer in it is grown, the easier it will be to gather and ship."

"Next thing, I s'pose they'll be findin' some use fer rattlers an' c'yotes," observed Jed, again looking at his watch.

"Waal, Number 6 is doo now," he continued, and as he spoke there came over the desert the far-off sound of a locomotive whistle, on hearing which Jed again became the railroad official.

It was a banner day for Jed. Number 6 was the one thing he could depend upon to break the terrific silence and monotony of the desert.

The opposite train, Number 7, passed in the night while Jed slept the sleep of the desert dweller. There were freight trains, of course, that stopped at the little station to take water, but they did not count. Number 6 was a big train. It carried passengers from everywhere and, although it never had stopped at Red Mesa, the travelers often waved to Jed standing on the lonely platform and, when he telegraphed his report of the train's passing, there was an opportunity for a little gossip over the wire with the operator at the next station.

To-day, however, there were two visitors with whom he could talk and, in addition, Number 6 was going to stop. Moreover, passengers, two of them young women, were going to alight. Jed again patted his little tie, cast an envious glance at Win's purple and red cravat and then busied himself with the baggage truck.

With a grinding of brakes Number 6 slowed down and finally came to an impatient stop at Red Mesa. From one of the sleeping cars a white-coated porter hopped nimbly down with his little stool, to be quickly followed by Philip

Jordan, who turned to assist Ruth and Polly to alight. Their bags were deposited on the platform, the porter hopped aboard the car and closed the vestibule door, and with the bell ringing slowly Number 6 once more took up its race towards the Pacific Coast.

As the train passed rapidly on into the desert, Ruth gazed after it with a queer look in her eyes. In its departure she saw severed the last link that had bound her to a tradition-ridden life. As the train was swallowed in huge clouds of white dust of its own making, she turned and tried to take in all the country about in one big look. The vastness, the silence, the miles upon miles of open space, filled her with awe, and she could only gasp her appreciation of the solemn beauty of it—beauty that was lost on the other members of the party.

“Where is the hotel?” demanded Polly, as Win hurried toward them with words of welcome. “I simply must arrange my hair again and put on a little powder.”

At the mention of hotel, Jed Patton, who had wandered up to the group, almost dropped his quid of tobacco as his mouth opened, and it was a full half-minute before he recovered

from his amazement. Long Ed Thompson had to turn away to hide a grin.

With an annoyed glance at Polly, Philip turned toward Long Ed and asked: "Are you Mr. Thompson, the man engaged by Mr. Burke to drive us to the Perkins ranch?"

"I'm Ed Thompson, but I ain't a-drivin' yuh to Perkins' Ranch. I'm a-showin' the way, and you all ride," answered Long Ed.

"We're going to ride?" asked Ruth eagerly. "That will be splendid! How far is it, Mr. Thompson?"

"Waal, mam," slowly replied Long Ed, as he scratched the top of his head with a forefinger, "we'd oughter make it by to-morro' night. We'll make camp durin' the heat o' the day, an' travel mostly at night an' in th' early mornin'."

"Two whole days before we get there?" whined Polly. "I simply will not be able to stand it. Imagine riding two days in a rickety old Ford, for I suppose that is what we will ride in. Oh, it's terrible!"

"I guess yuh didn't get me, mam," said Long Ed. "I said you all'ud ride. What I meant was, that you all'ud ride hosses. Why,

they ain't a sign of a automobile this side o' Mesa Grande."

"Well, I'm going right straight back to Milford Corners," was Polly's quick rejoinder. "You know very well, Philip, that I am deathly afraid of a horse, and as for riding one, I simply would die." Then almost on the verge of tears, she turned on Ruth with: "It's all your fault, Ruth Jordan, coming away out here where there isn't even a hotel, and where one has to ride on a horse to get anywhere." Then Polly broke down and wept, which caused Jed and Long Ed to exchange glances, and give mental thanksgiving that they were leading lives of single blessedness.

"Oh, come now, Polly, it will be wonderful!" said Ruth in her most conciliatory tone. "Why, you'll be crazy about horseback riding after you have been doing it for a while."

"I think you are all crazy now," sobbed Polly, slightly reassured, however, by Ruth's manner.

"We can make Cottonwood, before it gets too hot, if we leave now," said Long Ed, as he picked up two of the hand bags that had been placed on the platform by the porter.



A Metro-Goldwyn Picture

The Great Drive

Philip and Win each took up a suitcase and followed Long Ed as he made his way to the hitching rack back of the station.

Jed with Ruth and Polly on either side brought up the rear. It was seldom Jed had the chance to escort two good-looking young ladies even so short a distance as from the platform to the hitching rack, so he was making the most of his opportunity.

"You have a wonderful country here, Mr. Patton," said Ruth, for by this time Jed had imparted not only his name but a comprehensive outline of his family history.

"Yep," was the laconic reply, "there's a heap of it, too."

"I don't see anything wonderful about it at all," complained Polly. "Just look, there isn't a thing here but this terrible old station. Not another building in sight. Just look!"

Jed looked to make sure that there really was no other building hiding anywhere about. He had to admit to himself that the young lady was certainly telling the truth, although he resented her reference to the station which was his pride. Why, only two years ago, he had painted it himself.

It was only a few steps from the platform to the horses, and as the little party arrived, it seemed as if by common impulse all looked at Polly as much as to say: "You are the one who is going to give us the most trouble, so you will mount first."

At sight of the horses, Polly drew back in fear, grasping Ruth's arm as though for protection.

"Oh, Ruth, I simply can't get on one of those animals by myself," she said. Then as if struck by a bright idea she added: "Couldn't you and I ride on the same one, to keep each other company?"

"I'm afraid not, dear," answered Ruth, laughing. "It would be too much of a strain on the horse, I am sure. But, come on, here is a nice little red-coated horse for you, and the saddle looks just as comfortable as a rocking chair."

"Oh, I wish I was in a rocking chair back in Milford Corners," replied Polly as she surveyed the horse ruefully.

"Come on, Polly, I'll help you to mount," said Philip, as he took a step towards her with outstretched hand.

"You go away from me, Philip Jordan, you don't know anything about these horses," was Polly's reply as she backed away from Philip, who with a gesture of impatience turned from her to examine the saddle on the horse that had been picked out for his own use. Meanwhile Long Ed had skillfully thrown a diamond hitch over the hand baggage on the pack mules and turned in time to witness Philip's annoyance with Polly.

"If yuh'll step in my hand, mam, yuh'll have no trouble gittin' on Pete's back," he said.

"Step in your hand?" echoed Polly, in surprise. "Why, I never heard of such a thing!"

"Yes, mam," answered Long Ed, "yuh sorter make a step outen the hand and I lifts yuh right into the saddle."

"I hope you know what you are talking about," rejoined Polly, "but it sounds ridiculous to me."

"Please help me, Mr. Thompson, so that my sister will understand what you mean," suggested Ruth. And Long Ed, placing his hand to receive Ruth's foot, with a quick movement lifted her into the saddle without any apparent effort.

"See, it was easy, Polly," said Ruth.

"Well, I suppose I must, but I don't like it a little bit," replied Polly, as she placed her foot in the horny hand of Long Ed, who with a slight heave raised her from the ground and tried to accomplish with her what he had with Ruth. But for some reason or other Polly's riding skirt did not behave properly and caught on the pommel of the saddle, causing her to lurch over the back of the horse on the opposite side. She let go of the saddle, and Long Ed let go of her foot, so in her mad flight from the horse's back, Polly clutched wildly at the first thing that came in her way. It was Jed Patton, standing open-mouthed watching this bunch of tenderfeet who made such a fuss over getting on a horse.

Polly didn't fall off her horse. Her flight was stopped by contact with Jed. But in the frantic swinging of her arms, she knocked loose the little black bow on Jed's collar button, and it fell to the ground, where the sharp hoofs of the horse, made restive by the unusual performance on his back, ground it into shreds.

Long Ed laughed outright, although he knew that he had witnessed a tragedy in the life of

Jed Patton, who surveyed the tattered remnants of his beloved tie almost with tears in his eyes.

The mishap seemed to have a subduing influence on Polly, for she allowed Long Ed to fix her comfortably in the saddle and adjust the stirrups to the proper length.

Win Newbury had mounted his own horse before Jed received his great blow. Noticing the tragic look on Jed's face, he dismounted, and taking the glorious silk tie from his own neck he handed it to Jed, saying: "Here, you take this. I will be cooler riding without it."

Never in his wildest dreams had Jed expected to possess such a beautiful thing as the purple and red striped necktie. He recovered his voice only as the Jordans, led by Long Ed Thompson and followed by Win Newbury, passed into the desert on their way to the Perkins place to raise cactus, and called after Win Long Ed's earlier remark: "I'm sayin' you're all right, doc. Thanks, ol' timer."

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"I simply can't go another step! If I do, I know I shall die. Oh, why did we ever leave

dear old Milford Corners?" Polly sobbed aloud.

Ruth and Win Newbury, who were just ahead of her on the trail, turned at once with sympathetic encouragement, while Philip, who had been riding beside Polly all morning and had put up with her continuous complaining, now showed annoyance by a despairing shrug of the shoulders.

It was the second day on the trail across the desert, from the railroad station at Red Mesa, and the little cavalcade was gradually nearing its destination, the old Perkins ranch, which Philip had purchased sight unseen from an Arizona real estate man.

As had been suggested by Long Ed Thompson, the party had camped during the hottest part of the day, making most of the journey during the cool of the evening and at night.

To comfort-loving Polly the journey had been more terrible than anything she could imagine. She ached in every bone and was ready to accept the teaching that "there is no Hell in the hereafter; it is right here with us now." Moreover, her idea of Hell was to have a wiry range pony between one's knees for a two-

day journey across the Arizona desert. Polly had never ridden anything more uncomfortable than the back seat of a Ford, and she was ready to concede, after many hours astride a range pony, that even a broken down Ford was a downy couch compared to the back of that particular horse. Polly was miserable, and it piqued her to see that the others were not only apparently free from the discomfort she was suffering, but were enjoying the trip.

Philip rode in silence beside Polly and ahead of them rode Ruth and Win, so close at times that their stirrups touched, while, bringing up the rear, were the pack mules led by Long Ed Thompson, who occasionally shouted instructions to those in front.

"Isn't it magnificent, Win?" said Ruth, as she surveyed the surrounding country. "Look at those mountains, so far away, yet appearing to be not more than a mile or two from here."

Win Newbury looked, but not at the mountains. His eyes were for Ruth all of the time, and as she caught his gaze and the telltale expression in his eyes, she colored slightly and sent her pony ahead at a brisk lope, leaving Win in the rear.

The party soon was filing through a narrow pass between two sheer cliffs, which apparently had been worn away by water many years before. The various rock strata showed plainly and were of every conceivable color.

"Oh, isn't this gorgeous?" Ruth called back to Polly, who by this time was sitting over on one side of her pony, merely hanging on with one leg and a deathlike grip on the pommel of the saddle.

"Look at these wonderful colors!" Ruth continued, restraining a desire to laugh at the ridiculous figure Polly cut. "Aren't they wonderful? There is every color one could imagine."

"Don't bother me about colors in a mountain," replied Polly. "I am having my own troubles, and as for colors, I just know I am black, blue, purple and red all over. Oh, if I ever get off this pony alive, I'll never, never get on another as long as I live, especially this one."

"No doubt the pony feels the same way about it," retorted Philip. "You haven't been any great help to him. It seems to me you have ridden all over him from head to tail, and he

has hardly any mane left. You have been pulling it out by handfuls ever since we left Red Mesa."

"You're not such a centaur yourself, Philip Jordan," replied Polly. "I have noticed you lifting yourself up many times by your hands. I suppose that was for the purpose of taking the strain off the pony's back."

At this sally, Philip snorted, but made no reply. And Ruth once again stepped in between Polly and Philip as she had done many times since they had been married.

"Now don't quarrel like children, you two. Why can't you enjoy this wonderful scenery and breathe in this life-giving air? Why, I feel already as though I were a part of this great country." And the girl gazed off at the distant hills and drew in great gulps of the dry, bracing air.

"Well, you can have my part of it," answered Polly, "and there seems to be a lot of it around here that nobody wants. Why, we have been on the road for two days, and we haven't seen a soul or a single house, and as far as the air is concerned, I have always gotten along very well with the air in and

around Milford Corners, Ruth Jordan, so you didn't have to bring me away out here just to breathe."

In spite of the mournfulness of Polly's tone, they all, even Philip, had to laugh, while Long Ed Thompson, sitting patiently on his pony, grinned a little to himself and wondered at a part of the country that could produce such a fool sort of woman as Polly Jordan seemed to be. The women of Long Ed's acquaintance were not like that.

"Why, of course not," Ruth answered. "We're out here to make a lot of money, just oodles and oodles of it. Then we can go back home if we want to and spend it." Her glance took in Long Ed, who had listened to her statement with disbelief written all over his face.

Long Ed did not want to get into a perfectly good family argument, but if Ruth had asked him point blank what he thought of the money-making possibilities in that part of the country, he would have told her that he thought they were all crazy. He had been in that section almost all of his life, and the best that he could do was \$100 a month—some months. So how any tenderfoot could possibly come out

there and grab off oodles and oodles of money was beyond him. But as Ruth didn't ask him anything about it, he kept his mouth shut. He had been engaged to guide the party from Red Mesa to the ranch house, and he was going to do that if they didn't die on his hands before they got there. After that he was through, and if they could pry a fortune out of that barren country, it was all right with him.

Ooodles and oodles of money sounded good to Polly, but at that particular moment she would have traded her interest in the potential fortune for a gallon of arnica, lots of absorbent cotton and bandages and a sympathetic nurse to apply the arnica and wrap the bandages on the places where Polly ached most, which seemed to be all over her body.

As if by a preconceived notion, the party had stopped on the brow of a little rise, and for the time Polly's mind was relieved of the strain of devising ways and means of staying on the back of the pony, so she had every opportunity of taking inventory of her pains.

That part of Polly which was in closest contact with the saddle was on fire—that was the only simile she could think of at the time. She

just knew she was cut—couldn't she feel the blood trickling down into her riding boot? And her legs! They were warped and twisted to fit around the body of the pony, and every little muscle in them ached and throbbed. Her arms must be at least a foot longer than when she left Red Mesa and they didn't fit in their sockets at all. The top of her spine, she was certain, was resting against the inside of the top of her skull and it had almost as many twists in it as the trail over which they had come. There flashed into her mind a picture in front of the old chiropractor's office back in Milford Corners, which depicted a spinal column and the many and varied ills caused by the slightest kink in that important member of the human structure. She was certain that, with her spine in its present condition, she must be liable to all of the ailments tabulated on the chart and a great many others about which science as yet knew nothing. Under the circumstances, she did not understand how she possibly could live. She doubted if she would survive the trip and was not at all certain that she wanted to.

Ruth, on the other hand, sat her pony quietly,

gazing off into the distance as though trying to pierce the horizon and to fathom the mysteries of the desert and the far-away mountains. There was a new light in her eyes, an eagerness that Win Newbury, watching her closely, never before had seen there and, loving Ruth as he did, he wondered what had caused this ordinarily practical-minded girl suddenly to turn dreamer.

For Win was a typical product of Milford Corners, somewhat broadened, of course, by his years at college and medical school and by the very nature of his work which brought him in contact with suffering humanity with all of its opportunities for intimate study of the emotions. All of this, however, had not served to in any degree change the matter-of-fact New England mind nor to increase his imaginative powers. To Win, the Arizona desert was an expanse of sand and alkali, an uncomfortable and unpleasant place over which it was necessary to travel in order to reach their destination and, as such, to be borne with, but on which it was unnecessary and inexpedient to linger. The distant mountains were—just mountains. They were not in any way con-

nected with the journey, so they were of no present concern to Win.

He, therefore, could not know that the wide, peak-bordered waste had laid hold of Ruth's imagination and had awakened in her longings that her mind in its present state could not comprehend or even piece together in a connected train of thought. He could not know that Ruth was, at that moment, as far from him and the others of the party as the distant ages that had seen the carving of those far-off mountains into fantastic peaks and canyons and the painting of them in colors which, try as they would, the famous old masters never could equal—colors that only the Master Himself could mix.

As Ruth sat and gazed, she was conscious of Win beside her, but, in the fleeting fancies that surged through her mind, Win himself was not there. Instead there was another whom she never before had seen but who nevertheless was not a stranger, but a part of her as she was a part of this vast, primitive world. There was no feeling of strangeness in a new country, no desert waste. Merely there was surpassing beauty and peace and understanding between

her and this companion of her imagination and the sky and the sand and the hills. They were all one and she was content and supremely happy.

Win Newbury watched the passing thoughts reflected in the face of the girl he loved. He noted the rise and fall of her bosom as she breathed in the pure air, the glow of her cheeks as with the blood of a new life and the dilation of her nostrils as fancy succeeded fancy, and his heart sank. He knew that, in the few minutes they had halted on the trail, the Ruth Jordan he had known had gone, never to return and that, in her place, was a new Ruth Jordan whose soul had developed far beyond his powers to satisfy.

Philip also had been observing Ruth, but attributed her silence to admiration for the scenery in which he was utterly unable to share. Philip was tired, somewhat saddle-sore and worn out in spirit by the constant complaining of Polly.

"Well, come on, let's go," he said impatiently. "We'll never get to the ranch if we travel like this. Come along, Mr. Thompson, let's be on our way."

Long Ed Thompson had been gazing at Ruth, and admitted to himself that she was a mighty pretty girl, and that such a girl should deliberately come to a wild and "gawd-fersaken" region of Arizona was a mystery altogether too deep for his brain to fathom.

"How much farther is it?" whined Polly, who all this time had been gently patting the spots where she felt sure she was bruised beyond all healing.

"Only about five miles, I reckon," answered Long Ed, as he sent his pony ahead, with the pack mules following closely. "We kin see yer house when we git round that bend there yonder," he continued, pointing a huge forefinger.

Ruth, coming back to current events with a start, glanced quickly around to see if the others had sensed the transition that she knew had taken place within her. She could not but notice that Win Newbury was looking at her in a puzzled manner, but the rest of the party apparently were too much concerned with their own troubles to bother about her.

So once again the party got under way, Polly and Philip following Ruth and Win, and Long Ed with his mules bringing up the rear. The

pause had temporarily eased a few of Polly's bruises, but once she had started, they began to hurt all over again, and seemed now to ache more than ever, as though annoyed at being disturbed.

The country through which they were passing was beautiful beyond description: here and there, standing straight, were the giant cacti, like lonely sentinels placed to watch over some hidden secret of the desert country. Occasional deep gorges, through which small silvery streams wound like a finely spun thread, lay hundreds of feet below them. Again there rose beside them great cliffs painted by the Master's hand in deep reds, purples and gold. High over head could be seen an occasional great bird flying lazily in widening circles until it disappeared from sight. To Ruth, in her exalted mood, the flight of the birds was watched over by Him who even now was guiding the destinies of them all.

On and on they went, stopping occasionally as Ruth discovered some new wonderful view which was lost to the others, for each was busy with thoughts in which the beauties of nature had no place, and only in the breast of the girl

was a responsive chord struck as the gigantic panorama unfolded new vistas.

"Let's hurry," said Philip testily, as Ruth paused to look at a long sweeping stretch of country. "We'll never get anywhere going like this, Ruth. You'll have plenty of time to look at all this. Nobody is going to take it away from us; it always has been here, and will be here longer than we will." And Philip urged the party forward again.

"It'll be here a good deal longer than I will," panted Polly, as she almost pitched off her pony, "because I am leaving just as soon as I can. I want to go while I am alive."

"Please, Philip," answered Ruth, "I want always to remember my first impression of this wonderful land. It is always the most vivid, and while we may see all this again many, many times, it will never have the same effect, or the same appeal as now, and I intend to make the most of it just as though I never would see it again."

Philip's answer was the usual shrug of the shoulders, more eloquent than words, for Philip had a way of putting a great deal of expression into his shrugs. He had certain shrugs for

every member of his family, and Polly always complained that the meanest of all was reserved for her. His shrugs meant little to Ruth, however, for she had her own way of dealing with Philip, something that Polly had soon discovered after her marriage and which she did not hesitate to make use of whenever possible to gain her own ends.

Having finally absorbed the beauties of the scene before her, Ruth turned and the party resumed its journey. About a mile farther on, as they mounted a slight rise, Long Ed Thompson called to Philip: "Yuh kin see yer place from here, Mr. Jordan." At the same time he pointed straight ahead. Philip urged his pony up beside Ruth and Win and all stopped to regard their future home.

It was a low, rambling ranch house of adobe, with the heavy beams which supported the flat roof protruding from the walls. A broad porch, with a sloping roof, ran across the entire front of the building. A wire fence, somewhat in need of repairs, surrounded the house and several outbuildings. In the rear was an adobe stable of the same style of architecture as the house, and a high corral built of heavy planks

which needed a fresh coat of whitewash. On all sides stretched miles upon miles of desert and far in the distance, to the South and West, were the silent, majestic mountains.

“Our home!” exclaimed Ruth, delightedly. “Come, let’s hurry.” She dug her heels into her pony’s flanks and started off at a brisk lope, followed closely by Win Newbury.

At her first glance, Polly’s heart sank. The house was still too far away for critical inspection, but Polly felt certain that she was not going to like the place at all. Even Philip was not particularly impressed by the appearance of the property on which the future of the family depended, but he decided to withhold comment until he could obtain a closer view. He urged his horse to a trot and called back to Polly:

“Come along, Polly. It’s only a step now. Brace up and get some speed into that nag of yours.”

“Wait, Philip, wait,” wailed Polly. “Don’t leave me here alone. I am falling. I can’t go another step.”

Philip turned his pony almost viciously and rode back to where Polly was twisting in her

saddle in a vain attempt to ease her aching muscles.

"You'll have to hold me on, Philip," said Polly, as he rode up beside her. "I have lost all my strength and I can't seem to do anything with this horse."

"All right!" growled Philip impatiently. "But come on, let's be going." And taking the arm of his wife who was on the verge of tears, he steadied her on the back of the pony, and they started off at a walk.

Meanwhile, Long Ed had gone ahead with the pack mules which, sensing food and water and relief from their burdens, went forward eagerly. Long before Polly and Philip arrived, he had hastily unpacked the baggage and piled it indiscriminately in the living room of the house. Having disposed of the packs, Long Ed had taken himself off to the stable there to make his animals comfortable and be out of the way of Polly, who, as he would have admitted, made him "plumb weary."

Ruth and Win upon arriving in the yard dismounted, and while Win led the horses off toward the stable, the girl stood and gazed around her. The ranch house, dirty and out

of repair though it was, in her eyes became picturesque and a part of the wonderful country. To her it spelled romance. She saw nothing of the barrenness, nothing of the squalor. She saw the house as it would be when she had transformed it into a home.

"Isn't it wonderful, Win?" she said, as Newbury came back to her.

"It is now," answered Win, gazing at her. "Anywhere you are, is wonderful, Ruth. Can't you understand . . . I . . ."

He had no opportunity to utter the words that were on his lips, for at that moment Polly and Philip approached the house and a ludicrous sight they made. Polly was leaning far over toward Philip, who supported her by one arm. She had one foot in the stirrup and the other hooked on the pommel of her saddle, so that she really hung suspended between the horse and Philip.

"Hey, come give me a lift," called Philip, as he brought both ponies to a stop some distance from the porch.

Suppressing a wild desire to laugh, Ruth and Win hurried toward them and Win helped

Philip to lower the trembling girl to the ground.

Once on her feet, Polly was in worse agony than she had been in the saddle. Every muscle in her legs ached as she put her weight on them, and neither leg would straighten out at all. Taking her between them, Philip and Win started her for the house, and every step of the way was added misery for her. She was compelled to hobble along on the sides of her feet, so that she would not have to torture her legs by trying to straighten them out.

"I can't go any farther to-day," moaned Polly. "It would kill me."

"It isn't necessary to go any farther. We're here. This is the place," answered Philip.

"This!" fairly screamed Polly. "Oh, this can't be it, Philip. Why, it was such a pretty place in that picture."

"Well, this is it," answered Philip.

"Let me see that picture," demanded Polly, as she began to search Philip's pockets for the colored advertisement with which she had entertained the neighbors in Milford Corners. Locating the artist's conception of what a

Spanish hacienda really looked like, Polly compared it with the stern reality there in the yard and said in despair: "Oh, Philip, we have been cheated, we have been cheated." And then she broke down completely.

"Where are all the hands? All those picturesque people with the gay colored suits and the high peaked hats with the silver all over them?" she sobbed, as she glanced around the ranch yard.

"No one has lived here for a long time," answered Ruth, trying to pacify her. "That picture must have been made a long while ago. Come, dear, you'll feel much better if we go inside where you can rest."

"I can't live in a place like this," Polly cried. "I can't and I won't. I'm going back." And she struggled free from Win and Philip and started towards her pony.

"I hope you enjoy your ride back to the station," said Philip, callously, completely out of humor with Polly's complaints and his own disappointment at the place. "The trail will be easy to find; just follow the tracks of your pony that zigzagged from Red Mesa to here, and you won't get lost."

Polly knew she was beaten, and turned sorrowfully towards Philip and Newbury, a sad and drooping figure, her hair bedraggled, and her face streaked where the tears had plowed through the desert dust.

Ruth took Win's place and assisted Philip with the forlorn girl, and Polly, gulping sobs every pain-racked step of the way, started again for the house. Onto the porch they climbed, and although it was but a single low step, the exertion of raising one leg up brought the most exquisite torture to Polly. It was but a step across the veranda to the door of the big living room, and Polly, half walking, half dragged, entered the room supported by Philip and Ruth, while Win swung open the heavy wooden shutters that covered the windows.

Once inside Polly was led to a trunk and gently lowered to a sitting posture, but the trunk might just as well have been a red hot stove as far as Polly was concerned, for no sooner had she touched it than she jumped up with as much alacrity as she could summon.

"Oh, I can't sit down; I never will be able to sit down again as long as I live. I am on fire." And the poor girl again burst into tears,

to the further annoyance of Philip, who, at Ruth's suggestion, grumblingly helped Polly into one of the bedrooms.

The living room of the ranch ran the entire width of the main part of the house. At one end was a big fireplace and, at the back, directly opposite the entrance door, was a passage leading to the kitchen. At one side, opposite the fireplace, was a door leading into a bedroom which Ruth had selected as her own. This room occupied an entire wing of the house and contained several windows. One of these opened directly onto the porch, while the one on the opposite side looked to the west over miles of desert that rolled its way to the distant mountains. Near the kitchen passage-way was another door that opened into the bedroom that Philip and Polly were to use.

The living room was in great disorder. The things that Long Ed had brought into the house had been dumped without ceremony on the floor, while here and there were crates of furniture which had been shipped some time before they left Milford Corners and which Win had caused to be carted over from Mesa Grande, the shipping point nearest the ranch.

Ruth anticipated with delight the furnishing of the new home. She saw in mental vision just how cozy and comfortable this great room would be. She could tell just where every piece of furniture would be placed and how much the appearance of the room would be improved after a little work with a paint brush.

She walked slowly over to the window of the living room and gazed out over the great expanse of desert, with its majestic background, and while she stood almost entranced by the sheer beauty of the view, Win joined her, and as she felt, rather than saw him, she murmured, more to herself than to him: "Isn't it wonderful? I almost feel as if I belong here already."

Win nodded, and was about to reply, when Philip dashed into the room, hastily grabbed a traveling bag from the floor, took a can of talcum powder from it and hurried back to the bedroom, whence a plaintive moan came from Polly.

CHAPTER IV

How Polly Jordan survived the first months of her stay in Arizona, she never knew. She was buoyed up to some extent by the promise of Ruth and Philip that she should have a trip East as soon as the project on which all their energies were centered had reached a certain stage of development.

True to the promise she had made herself on the day of their arrival at the ranch, Ruth had indeed worked wonders and the interior of the house was transformed. Navajo rugs were spread about in profusion, adding color and cheer to the big living room. Pictures adorned the walls and on a large table were books and magazines and the big lamp that had been brought from New England. Always on this table and in every other available place were vases filled with freshly picked cactus blooms. On the wall over the fireplace were hung a modern thirty-thirty rifle and a belt and holster containing a heavy revolver for

use against the stray coyote or the chance prowler. Alongside a window, where it caught the draft, was a big, red, Indian pottery jar of drinking water with a gourd dipper hanging beside it.

It was all very picturesque and homelike to every one except Polly. As far as that young woman was concerned, nothing was or could be cheerful or comfortable in this terrible land, where it never rained and the sun blistered one's skin to a lobster red. The first time Polly encountered a snake she fled to the corral and sat on the top plank of the high fence until Philip came and carried her into the house. The sight of a horned toad pursuing its own way about its own affairs had sent her into mild hysterics and once when a little lizard had scuttled across the porch, she had sat bolt upright in the hammock with her feet curled under her for two hours until Ruth and Philip returned from a ride around the ranch. No, Polly did not like Arizona. It contained too many disconcerting surprises.

So far as the commercial side of the venture was concerned, matters had gone fairly well. Plenty of Mexican labor was obtainable in

Mesa Grande, the quaint half old, half new, three-quarter Mexican and one-quarter American town, about fifteen miles south of the ranch. With this help, under the competent supervision of Philip, who gradually had become accustomed to the leisureliness of the Mexicans, they had been able to gather and ship large quantities of the wild desert cactus and to plant many acres surrounding the ranch house. The cactus was mean stuff to handle and Ruth was continually being called to dress minor wounds made by the sharp spines.

However, there was no doubt that the new process of extracting the long, tough fiber was a success and that there was a ready market for the dried fiber. Philip had been able to obtain a contract for all the raw material he could ship at a price which promised to show a good profit once the initial expenses of the venture were made up.

Win Newbury was a frequent visitor at the ranch, for the mine at which he was employed was but a scant fifteen miles away and fifteen miles in that country was not considered an obstacle to at least semi-weekly calls on the girl with whom a man happened to be in love.

Many times Win had been on the point of asking Ruth to become his wife, but always something in her manner had kept him silent. Ruth, to all appearances, was the same Ruth he had known all his life in Milford Corners, yet, there seemed at times to be a new element to her nature that he could not define. He often recalled Ruth's manner that day, when she took in for the first time the tremendous sweep and color and power of the desert country; the day he had first sensed a change in the soul of her. He could not comprehend it, but it was the one thing that always held him back when he had nerved himself to the point of asking her to marry him.

They took frequent long rides together over the desert, climbed high rocky paths, explored deep canyons, and always at every turn Ruth would find new beauties, new interests. She seemed to vibrate with the very joy of being in and a part of the vast country to which she had come from the narrow, tradition-bound New England village.

Many times Ruth and Win had ridden to Mesa Grande, and the beauty of the New England girl with her golden hair was a source

of wonderment to the swarthy men and olive-skinned women of the Mexican population. Win was well known to the residents of the little town, for he had given his medical skill many times to alleviate the sufferings of the unfortunate, content to take his pay in the extravagant blessings heaped on his head by the grateful patients.

Polly Jordan, however, found nothing beautiful or picturesque in Mesa Grande. To her the town was squalid and the natives dirty. She had gone there several times with Philip, but they had gone in a buckboard behind a team of horses. For the day that she had been helped down from the back of the range pony that had carried her from Red Mesa to the ranch, had witnessed Polly's last appearance as an equestrienne. Once her bruises had healed and the raw spots had been re-upholstered with new skin, she was content to take her daily canter in the hammock on the porch.

She declared that never again would she mount any kind of an animal, not even excepting the wooden horses of a merry-go-round. Even a leather-covered chair reminded her of



A Metro Goldwyn Picture.

RUTH IS CONFRONTED WITH THE TERRIFYING ADVANCES OF THE LOATHSOME "DUTCH."

The Great Divide.

a saddle, so that she always picked a plush-covered or cushioned chair for her own use.

In the wide open spaces of Arizona Polly Jordan was as much at home as a Hottentot would have been in Milford Corners, and she prayed that the day would soon arrive when she could take the promised trip East. The trunkful of clothes she had brought from New England had hardly been worn. She did dress for dinner a few times until the ridicule of Philip put a stop to this. Aside, therefore, from a few gingham house dresses and her riding habit, which she wore whenever she drove in the buckboard, her wardrobe was still intact.

At first Philip was disinclined to allow her to make the trip, but Polly got around this by weeping copiously until in the end Ruth prevailed upon Philip to give in and herself promised that Polly should go. Polly knew from past experience that once Ruth made a promise she would keep her word, even though she had to break the whole ten commandments and a few legal statutes to do so. Polly, therefore, rested content, certain that when the time came Philip would arrange matters, because

Ruth would make him do so, and although she had frequently resented Ruth's influence over Philip, here at least was one occasion wherein she would be directly benefited.

With the trip in prospect, Polly tried many schemes to hasten the day of departure. Once she tried being sick, but that idea proved to be the worst kind of a boomerang, for Win Newbury, in his official capacity of family physician, had, after consultation with Ruth and Philip, prescribed a large dose of castor oil "to reduce the fever."

Another time she decided that a good way to get East in a hurry would be to have a relative die. She gave a deal of thought to this, but had to abandon it because she had no living relatives outside of her in-laws, and she disliked to bring sudden death, even though fictitious, upon Mrs. Jordan. The consequences were sure to be unpleasant. Once or twice she tried tears, but without any success at all, Philip merely reminding her that when the proper time came, she should have the trip, and that in the meantime she might as well make the best of things as they were.

At last the date was set and Polly brightened

amazingly. When Win Newbury rode over and asked Ruth to go riding, Polly insisted that it would be the only thing for Ruth to do. Ruth needed a rest, she said, and it would be a good thing to put up a lunch and make a day of it.

Ruth went, and with her out of the house Polly began to repack her trunk for, she hoped, the last time. Armloads of clothes were carried from the bedroom and placed in the trunk which had been dragged into the living room, and through it all Polly sang joyously until the Mexican cook in the bunkhouse where the men lived and ate, marveled at the sudden but welcome change that had come over the none too popular "boss-lady."

Philip had been riding over the ranch, making inspection of new cactus beds, and it was late in the afternoon before he turned his pony homeward. As he looked at his watch, he saw it would be only a few hours before they would have to start on their long night drive to Red Mesa, where Polly was to take the train.

All the afternoon Ruth and Win had ridden over the desert, the girl glorying in the freedom of the open country where life seemed so good, the man content to be with the one

woman. Once while riding through a deep canyon, Ruth had said: "Do you know, Win, every time I ride through this wonderful country, even though we go to new spots, it all seems very familiar as though I had been here ages before.

"Look over there," she continued, pointing with her beaded quirt, "see that big rock formation, carved like a Sphynx. Why, even that seems familiar. I feel as though it was but yesterday that I rode through here, but I know it must have been thousands of yesterdays ago."

"Why, Ruth, you startle me!" exclaimed Win. "You aren't going in for transmigration and evolution and that sort of thing are you?"

Ruth was silent for a moment and then said: "I don't know. After all, there may be something in those things. Haven't you often been in places for the first time and felt that you really had been there and seen everything long before?—You know what I mean, don't you, Win?" she added, doubtfully.

"Yes," he answered. "I know what you mean and I have experienced the feeling, but I don't see what it has to do with evolution."

"Well, I don't know just what it might be called," said Ruth, "but to me it is sometimes so vividly real that it almost frightens me."

Sensing the seriousness of the girl's mood and hoping to bring her back to more immediate affairs, Win laughed and asked: "And what was I in this age of yesterdays, Ruth?"

"Please, Win, don't make fun of me," she pleaded. "I am serious and it means so much to me. I wish I had the wisdom of some of the old philosophers, for maybe then I could make you understand."

"I do understand, dear," Win replied tenderly. "But what does it matter what this thing may be? Suppose we were alive and here or elsewhere ages and ages ago. We are here now, so why not let's live in the present? Ruth, dear, I—I love you—I—"

The girl raised a restraining hand, at the same time giving him an appealing look. "Don't, Win," she said. "As you say, we are in the present and life is so good, so big, just as it is. Let's not change it."

"But, come," she continued brightly, as she turned back the cuff of her riding glove and

glanced at her watch. "We must be on our way home if we are to reach the ranch before Polly leaves."

Silently they rode, side by side. Once or twice in the course of the ten-mile ride back to the ranch, Win was on the point of reopening the subject, but the serious, intent expression on Ruth's face restrained him.

Back at the ranch Polly sang gayly at the task of packing her trunk. Philip was to drive her over to Red Mesa and, by traveling all night, taking advantage of the lower temperature that came with the sunset, they could reach the railroad before noon, it being possible to make much better time with a team and buckboard than on horseback, accompanied by slow-moving pack mules as they had been on their first journey from Red Mesa to the ranch.

Her task was practically completed when she heard Philip ride into the yard. She went to greet him, but he continued on to the corral where he arrived just in time to see the Mexican ranch cook mount a pony and start for the gate. Philip stopped him and asked:

"Where is Tony?"

"Gone," replied the cook, pointing in the general direction of Mesa Grande.

"Gone!" echoed Philip. "Gone where?"

"Mesa Grande; fiesta," answered the cook with a broad grin, then digging his heels into the sides of his pony, he started off, saying over his shoulder: "Me go, too."

"Have they all gone?" Philip yelled after him.

"Si, si—all go," was the reply as the Mexican kicked his horse into a shambling trot and rode out of the corral.

"Damn their fiestas!" said Philip fiercely as he dismounted, unsaddled his horse, and started for the house. "Every other day they have some sort of a fiesta. I am so sick of the word fiesta, I could kill the next person that mentions it."

So it was not a very cheerful Philip that banged into the living room, interrupting the song on Polly's lips and throwing his hat across the room. Polly looked up from her packing in surprise as Philip glared at her. She immediately had a feeling that something had occurred that might interfere with her trip, and said, "What's the matter, Philip?"

"Your trip is off, that's what's the matter," he answered.

"W-w-w-w-hat!" gasped Polly as the full import of his words gradually dawned on her. She leaned heavily on the open lid of the trunk which closed with a bang, almost letting her fall to the floor, but she recovered herself and sat on the trunk.

Philip glared at her and, looking off toward the corral, at the same time gesticulating fiercely, shouted: "The ranch is deserted—all the hands have gone to that infernal fiesta at Mesa Grande."

Polly immediately turned on the tears, and Philip promptly repented his brusqueness and tried to comfort her, but it was of little use, for the more he tried to pacify her the harder she cried, until in desperation he left her to herself and strode to the big window that looked out on the desert, which had never seemed to him to have been quite so desolate as at that particular moment.

"Well, you said I could go," wailed Polly, "so I don't see why I can't. I'm all packed and everything. It isn't fair!"

"Of course I said so," Philip answered

sharply. "But how could I know that these Mexicans would have to celebrate some fool thing or other on the very day you would be leaving? However, be that as it may, you can't go and that settles it." And turning his back on his tearful wife, Philip picked up a small book and idly thumbed the pages while Polly's weeping grew louder and more unrestrained at every gulp.

"For Pete's sake, will you stop that crying!" he exclaimed in exasperation, as he banged the book down on the table.

At the sound Polly looked up and wailed: "That's right! You not only ill-treat me, but you make a disgusting display of temper, smash the furniture and everything. I didn't send the hands away; I'm not responsible for their old fiesta. Why abuse me?" And she went into another paroxysm of woe.

"Oh, please, like a good girl, do shut up!" said Philip as he once more turned toward her. He was thoroughly annoyed by the situation and most of his annoyance was due to appreciation of Polly's disappointment, but he did not feel that he could help it and, really, her steady weeping and complaining got on his nerves.

Seeing that she was accomplishing nothing with tears, Polly began to plead. "Please, Phil, dear. You know you promised. Please let me go. You can easily get back here early day after to-morrow."

"No," answered Philip, and there was a tone of finality in his voice that was not lost on Polly, so she subsided for the moment, while he again turned to look out of the window. Suddenly he leaned forward and saw Ruth and Win coming across the desert at a smart canter. Polly also saw them and at once prepared for a new flood of tears to be turned loose the moment Ruth entered the room.

CHAPTER V

IN a few minutes the riders had dismounted at the porch, and, as Win started to lead the horses to the corral, Ruth entered the room, carrying a big bunch of cactus blooms that they had gathered on the way home. Both started toward her at the same time, Polly in tears and Philip trying to explain the situation.

“Stop! Stop! For Heaven’s sake!” cried Ruth, as she held her hands over her ears and, as they ceased their clamor, she continued: “Now, one at a time, tell me what’s the matter.”

“He won’t let me go! He won’t let me go!” Polly wailed.

“Why can’t she go, Philip?” asked Ruth, putting her arm around the disconsolate Polly, who rested her head on Ruth’s shoulder and turned loose the flood which she had saved for this moment.

“Why, the place is deserted; every man jack of the help has gone to a fiesta at Mesa

Grande," answered Philip. "We can't leave the ranch alone, and that's all there is to it."

"Oh, I must go!" wept Polly. "I must go! I can't stand this place another minute! My trunk is all packed and I'm going anyway, even if I have to walk all the way to Milford Corners."

"Why, Philip," Ruth cut in, "we must let Polly go. Why, we gave her our promise!"

"I don't care anything about that; she can't go and that's flat."

"Oh, I've simply got to go!" came from Polly.

"Philip!" Ruth called sharply and Philip turned toward her as she disengaged herself from Polly's grasp. "Do you realize that we have given Polly our promise? Don't you know what that means?" And she gazed at her brother in amazement.

"Yes, of course I do," he answered. "But we can't leave the ranch alone. Why, there isn't a soul within fifteen miles!"

"Don't be silly!" said Ruth. "The ranch won't be left alone while I'm here, will it? Nothing can possibly harm me and besides

some of the men will be back from Mesa Grande before morning." Then, with a glance at Polly, she continued: "Finish packing, Polly. You are going, of course. Philip will lock the trunk when you are ready."

Win entered the room at this moment and, having heard Polly's "Oh, you darling!" as she hugged Ruth and turned to resume packing the trunk, asked: "What's all the row?"

"Oh, nothing, Win, except that Polly thought for a moment that her trip was off. Philip wasn't going to let her go because he didn't want to leave the ranch deserted," answered Ruth. Then, as an idea came to her, she exclaimed: "How silly of us not to have thought of it before! Win can stay here with me until you get back, Philip, and the place will be well looked after."

"Why, certainly! I'd be only too glad to stay," said Win, greatly to the apparent relief of every one.

Discovering that she still held the cactus blooms, Ruth went to the kitchen to get a vase, followed by Win. On a shelf slightly above her head were several small vases and Ruth asked Win to reach one for her. In doing so he dis-

lodged a package of rice which toppled over, spilling its contents over them.

"It's an omen!" laughed Win, at the same time trying to grasp the hand Ruth had held out for the vase. "It must be, Ruth. Can't you see?" he went on eagerly.

"I can't see anything of the kind," replied Ruth, laughing. "All I can see is that you've been unusually clumsy, especially for a sure-handed surgeon. But if you will listen, you'll hear something from the other room." And she held up a finger to enjoin silence.

Just then there came from the living room, in Philip's most irritated tones: "Damn it! I tell you it won't close. You've got altogether too much truck in it. With all the practice you've had packing and unpacking the last couple of months, it seems to me you might have learned the capacity of this trunk by now."

"Come, Win, we'll have to render first aid pronto!" said Ruth as she hurried from the kitchen with Newbury following resignedly in time to hear Philip say to Polly:

"Will you please sit on the other end of the trunk? Do something to help, for Heaven's sake and don't stand there picking your fingers

like a ninny," he fairly shouted as he struggled to close the trunk.

Poor Polly stood helplessly staring at him, her fingers involuntarily picking at each other, a habit of hers when she was agitated. Philip, perspiration dripping from his forehead, was trying with all his strength to jam one end of the trunk shut so that he could snap the catch. Just as he succeeded in getting one end in place, the other would jump up, pushed from below by the mass of things Polly had hastily thrown in. After one of these futile efforts, he paused, straightened up and pleaded:

"I am asking you, Polly, to please at least try to be useful as well as ornamental and sit on the other end of this trunk."

Polly, still staring dazedly at him, slowly approached the trunk, and, turning, backed up to it like a willing horse.

"Sit down!" yelled Philip in exasperation, and Polly sat down. As her weight was thrown on the end of the lid, it almost settled into place and Philip sprang to snap the catch. At that moment Polly jumped up, dashed into the bedroom without a word, and returned with a package.

"This must go in, Phil, dear," she said meekly.

"Ye gods!" roared Philip, as he resignedly unfastened the one catch that was in place and raised the lid. "There, put it in."

"Not there, dear. Lift out the tray, please." replied Polly, taking a step forward as though to help.

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated Philip. "Why in . . ." But words failed and he lifted the tray and held it on one knee in cold silence while Polly placed the belated package in the trunk.

"Now, is everything in?" he asked. "You're sure?" as Polly nodded. "Well, let's hope you are at least partly right." And again he went about the task of closing the trunk on which Polly had resumed her seat. But the lid would not close and, looking around, Philip discovered Win with his back turned, apparently laughing quietly, while Ruth was gazing out of the window biting her lip.

"Damn funny, isn't it?" he grunted, as he brought his weight down on the lid, this time forcing one end shut and throwing the catch in place. Then, with another nasty glare at Win,

he remarked: "It's a wonder you wouldn't give me a hand with this infernal trunk instead of standing there laughing like a fool jackass."

With this outburst, he again threw his weight on the trunk, jammed the lid in place, snapped the catch and turned the key in the lock.

"There, thank God, that's done!" he said as he wiped his brow. "Come on, Win, help me get this out to the buckboard before anything else happens. Look out, Polly!"

Win came forward and Polly stood up, but she could not move any farther because her skirt was caught under the edge of the lid and was now held fast in the locked trunk.

"Now see what you've done!" yelled Philip, glaring at her. Then, with a shrug of utter hopelessness and boiling with suppressed rage, he unlocked the trunk, slammed the lid open and, ordering Polly to stand as far away as possible, again set about the task of closing it. With Win's help the job was quickly accomplished this time and the two men started for the buckboard carrying the offending piece of luggage between them.

Suddenly Polly gave a nervous choking gasp and began waving her hands helplessly, unable

to utter a word. Philip looked at her with a hopeless expression, put down his end of the trunk and demanded: "Now what? Don't tell me you've forgotten something else. If you have, it's going to stay behind. Come on, Win, let's go."

Polly clawed wildly at the air, gulped and then, with an effort at control, blurted out:

"Oh, Phil, my shoes, my shoes! They're all in the trunk. I can't travel in house-slippers, can I?" And she looked appealingly around the room.

Philip turned livid as he sank into a chair, shaking his head helplessly and turning up his eyes as if in silent prayer for strength. Ruth and Win came quickly to the rescue, opened the trunk so that Polly was able, after a frantic search, to locate her shoes at the very bottom where she had put them "so they would be safe."

Once again the trays were put in place and Win was about to close the lid with Ruth's help, when Philip held up a restraining hand and said: "Stop! Now, Polly, take your time and if possible, think. Are you certain nothing more has to go in or come out? You know, my

dear, much as we enjoy your little game, we really should give some consideration to the railroad. Down there they don't know what a wonderful time we're having and consequently they may not hold the train for us. Be sure, now, there's a good girl." Polly meekly said: "Yes, dear." And the two men picked up the trunk and carried it hastily out to the waiting buckboard.

Polly quickly changed from house-slippers to shoes, debated putting the former into the trunk, decided against it and, as Philip and Win were roping the trunk to the buckboard so that it would hold during the rough trip to Red Mesa, she came to Ruth, and, with a knowing look said: "You really ought to thank me, Ruth, dear, for going in this way."

"Why, dear, I'll miss you a lot. Why should I thank you for going?" asked Ruth in surprise.

With a nod of her head toward Win out by the buckboard, Polly replied archly: "Good-looking, rising, young physician—charming girl—horseback rides—moonlight nights—spring of the year. Surely, a delightful romance could be made out of such ingredients."

Ruth laughed heartily and then, growing serious, said: "No, dear. Not Win. I used to play hookey with him when we were at school; I've seen his mother spank him; I've grown up with him; I know him too well. He is a wonderful friend—one whom any girl would be proud to have. But—romance with Win—oh, my dear!" And Ruth again laughed, while Polly shrugged and asked:

"Well, Ruth, if not Win, what kind of a man do you want for goodness' sake?"

"I don't know exactly, Polly. At any rate, I can't describe him so you would understand. But my dream man—I presume every girl has a dream man, hasn't she?—well, he's something like the country out here—" And she nodded toward the desert, at the same time spreading her arms to indicate bigness.

Before Polly could reply, the impatient voice of Philip came to the two girls, calling: "For, Heaven's sake, what's the matter now? Come on, Polly, snap into it and let's be on our way."

"Coming right away," called Polly, giving Ruth a queer little look as much as to say, "That sounds all well and good, but you can't fool me."

Both girls went out to where Philip and Win were standing beside the buckboard. Win came toward them, saying: "Well, Polly, I hope you have a wonderful time on your visit. I almost wish I were going along."

"Yes, you do!" replied Polly, with a knowing shake of the head and a quick glance at Ruth, who merely smiled absently and continued on toward the buckboard.

"Well, come on, get in," said Philip. "There isn't time to spend the rest of the evening saying good-by, and if we don't start now, we might as well give it up altogether."

"Right away, Phil," and Polly, with a hasty peck at Ruth's cheek, turned and climbed quickly into the buckboard.

Philip, with the reins in his hand, was just about to start the team, when his attention was attracted by a cloud of dust, rapidly moving toward the ranch along the brow of the hill. The wind cleared the dust for a moment and there was revealed a solitary rider, quirting an already galloping horse to further effort at speed.

"Now, what the devil is that?" Philip asked. Polly saw in the approaching horseman a

possible delay of her trip, so she excitedly began to call good-bys to Ruth and Win and to urge Philip to start the team, but he was watching the rider.

“Wonder what’s happened and where,” he said, shading his eyes with his hat brim. “Gosh, look at that fellow ride!” he exclaimed as the horseman, not waiting to go around by the gate, took the high wire fence at a bound and headed straight for them.

“Maybe it’s some one giving an alarm of a bandit raid,” suggested Polly as the thought came to her that such an occurrence not only would hasten her trip but might result in all of them leaving Arizona for the calm of New England.

“That’s a cheerful thought!” said Philip. “You can put your mind on the most delightful possibilities! If it is, you can say good-by to your trip, for not a step do you go away from here if any raiding is being done.” And Polly subsided into fearful silence.

From the moment he first saw the rider, Win Newbury felt certain that it was a hurry call for him. He cursed the luck that made him the only doctor for miles around and would pre-

vent him from taking advantage of the opportunity to act as Ruth's sole protector even for the short time Philip would be away from the ranch.

By this time, the rider, who proved to be a mere boy, dirty and ragged and covered with alkali dust from his long, fast ride, had approached the group by the buckboard and, pulling his horse up short, gasped: "Where's the doc?"

"I'm the doctor, son. What's the matter?" said Win, stepping forward, followed by Ruth.

"Oh, doc! Come quick! My old man got shot and his leg is broke over to Mesa Grande. Come quick, doc, will yuh?" And the boy looked piteously at Win.

"On the jump, son!" said Win. "Hop down and get a drink while I get ready." He started for the house where he had left the saddlebags containing his instruments and first aid kit, without which he had learned it was unsafe for him to travel in that country. Then his eyes fell upon Ruth and he stopped and said apologetically:

"Oh, I forgot. I can't go. I can't leave you alone, Ruth."

"Of course you must go and equally of course Ruth can't be left alone," said Philip. "Climb down, Polly. All bets are off!" And he started to climb out of the buckboard while Polly raised a wild wail.

"Keep still, Polly! Get back there, Philip, and get started! Nonsense, Win! Get your things and go on! Remember your professional oath!" said Ruth, rapid-firing instructions to everybody in an attempt to quell the tumult and bring order out of incipient chaos. Turning to the boy, she continued: "Son, you ride back to the corral, get a fresh horse and turn yours loose. You can get him to-morrow if your father is all right. You'll find the doctor's saddle and bridle hanging right next to the gate. Put them on his horse—the pinto—and bring it back here as quickly as you can. Win, go get your bags and your coat.

"Now, everybody do as I say!" she commanded when Philip and Win started to protest. "I would have liked Win to stay for company, but if anybody insinuates that I need protection there will be trouble. Remember, Philip, I'm a better shot than you are and bear in mind also your previous remark that we are

fifteen miles from anywhere, meaning Mesa Grande. Nobody is going to ride fifteen miles at night on the off chance that the ranch is untenanted, especially when there's a fiesta going on over there. Now, Philip, as you said to Polly a little while ago, snap into it and get going."

With this, she slapped the near horse on the flank, clucked to the team and called: "Good-by, Pollykins! Give my love to mother, write often and have a good time." The horses, now under Philip's control, headed for the gate.

As they moved away, Philip called back: "Better load the guns, Ruth, and be sure to put out the light as early as possible. No telling what riffraff may come drifting out from Mesa Grande and there's no need to hang out a welcoming beacon for them."

"All right, don't worry," answered Ruth. "Everything will be here when you get back."

Just then the boy rode up on a fresh horse, leading Win's by the bridle and Win himself came out of the house carrying his saddlebags.

"There's no need to tell you how disappointed I am, Ruth," he said. "I'd been

looking forward to being with you and for two pins I'd stay. Darn being a doctor, anyway! However, I suppose I've got to go. You'll be in no real danger and, as you said, your greatest trouble will be loneliness. It's a long ride, but if this man isn't in bad shape, I'll be back here before morning, so don't shoot if you hear me ride up."

"Of course, you must go, Win," Ruth replied. "I'll be all right. To hear you and Philip talk anybody would think I was an infant in arms. You mustn't think of attempting to get back to-night. Attend to your patient and get what rest you can. Come out sometime before noon if it's convenient, because I don't speak Mex very fluently and I may want some one to swear at the hands."

With this Ruth turned toward the house and stood on the porch while Win swung into the saddle and, following the anxious boy, rode out of the yard. At the gate he turned and waved at Ruth, who impudently blew a kiss to him. Then the two riders, urging their horses forward, mounted the hill and soon disappeared, leaving Ruth the sole occupant of the visible universe.

CHAPTER VI

"SEEMS tuh me the boss has been gone an oncommon long time this trip, Lon," observed Burt Williams, as he and Lon Anderson lingered at the rude table, smoking their pipes over a last cup of coffee. They were seated in the little shack high up in the Cordilleras, where they lived with Stephen Ghent, the absent "boss," and worked the mine that Ghent had discovered while prospecting a year or two before.

"How long's he been away now?" continued Burt, a lean, wiry individual, whose face and manner gave unmistakable evidence that most of his thirty-two years had been spent in the open and lived hard.

"P-p-utty nigh th-th-three w-w-weeks," stutted Lon. "B-b-but what's it t-t-to yuh?" he inquired. "T-t-the b-b-boss's able tuh t-t-tend tuh his own b-b-bus'ness 'thout 'ny h-h-help f'm you, I reckon."

"Oh, sure," said Burt, hastily. "I was jest

a-wonderin'. He's a queer sort of a hombre an' I don't git him a-tall."

Old Lon spat deliberately and accurately at a spider that was crawling on the edge of the woodbox beside the little sheet-iron camp stove, turned and, pointing the stem of his scarred and blackened pipe at Burt, said:

"'T-t-there yuh g-g-go ag'in, wonderin' 'b-b-bout th-th-things t-t-that ain't none o' yer d-d-dam' bus'ness. 'F I've t-t-told yuh once, I've t-t-told yuh th-th-thirty-s-s-six m-m-million t-t-times tuh quit it an' let t-t-t-the b-b-boss's doin's alone. Yer drawin' pay fer workin' the m-m-mine an' n-n-not fer workin' yer b-b-brain—s-s-sech as 't-t-tis—an' if yuh d-d-don't s-s-stop, yuh'll g-g-git inter t-t-trouble, s-s-sure's Gawd made l-l-little apples."

Whereupon the speaker swung around on the box that was serving him for a chair, shoved the tin cup and plate of his dinner, or rather supper, service, toward the center of the table, rested his arm on the table's edge and, crossing his huge feet on the edge of the woodbox, waited in comfort for Burt's next remark which he knew from experience would soon be forthcoming.

Lon was a typical old desert rat who, after years of unsuccessful prospecting on his own account, had come finally to work for Stephen Ghent, who had stumbled across him in the mountains when Lon, his food gone and his leg broken by a falling rock, was, as he put it, “ ’b-b-bout th-th-through.” Ghent had packed him back to his own camp, set the broken leg and nursed the man back to strength. After he was able to get around, he had helped Ghent with the claim and was now a sort of foreman of the mine, although he and Burt Williams, who had drifted in from nowhere, begged a meal and remained to work, were the only men Ghent employed.

He might have been fifty-five or six years old or he might have been seventy. His seamed and scarred face gave no indication of his age, his strength was that of a man in his prime, but the spectacles he wore indicated age in a country where such aids to eyesight were used by few.

His companion knocked the ashes out of his pipe onto the floor, gnawed a generous chew off a plug of tobacco which he took from the pocket of his nondescript trousers and settled

himself for conversation, for he was, as usual, in a talkative mood, and the extended absence of the boss had aroused his easily whetted curiosity. Ejecting a stream of tobacco juice in the direction of the woodbox, which seemed to do double duty as a cuspidor, he began: "I ain't sayin' . . ." But he got no further.

"Yer s-s-sayin' t-t-too d-d-dam' much," snorted Lon, who had quickly removed his feet from the edge of the box just in time to avoid Burt's carelessly-aimed stream. "'s they any reason yuh c-c-can't spit over my f-f-feet 'stead o' m-m-makin' me t-t-take 'em d-d-down ev'ry m-m-minute? 'f yuh c-c-can't larn t' chaw 'th-th-thout s-s-spittin' th' hull t-t-time, y'oughter quit."

"Gentlemen don't put their feet up high thataway in public," replied Burt, by way of a snappy come-back.

"'S that so?" said Lon, gazing at him over the rims of his spectacles. "Waal, l-l-lemme t-t-tell yuh s-s-somethin', s-s-son. It's th' t-t-top-notch o' ig-ig-ign'rance tuh use words yuh d-d-don't know th' m-m-meanin' of."

"What word's that?" queried Burt.

"G-g-gentlemen," replied Lon, with a twinkle

in his eye. "Yuh w-w-was referrin' tuh g-g-gentlemen an' yuh ain't g-g-got th' l-l-least idee what th' w-w-word m-m-means." And he rose from the table, at the same time knocking out his pipe in such manner that the ashes were distributed down the front of Burt's already soiled flannel shirt. "Wa-al," he continued, "guess I'll g-g-go an' p-p-put th' m-m-mine tuh b-b-bed."

"Wait, I'll go with yuh," said Burt, standing up and kicking the canned bean box on which he had been sitting back toward the wall of the shack. But Lon shook his head and, pointing to the table with its load of greasy tin dishes, said:

"N-n-no! G-g-guess I kin m-m-make out alone. Wh-wh-what you're goin' tuh d-d-do is s-s-stay here an' cl-cl-clean up this m-m-mess. Th' p-p-place ain't f-f-fit fer a M-m-mojave tuh l-l-live in an' it's your t-t-turn this w-w-week, so g-g-git g-g-goin'."

And he went out of the shack, leaving Burt to the distasteful task of making one job of the work he should have started immediately after breakfast instead of using the same dishes for three meals.

Lon climbed slowly down the steep trail that led from the shack to the mine and, reaching the rude door to the shaft, sat down on an empty powder box and refilled his pipe. He, too, had been wondering at Ghent's prolonged absence but, unlike Burt, he had kept his thoughts to himself, as long experience had taught him to do with matters that were not his business.

He had accepted Ghent as a friend ever since their first meeting without giving a thought to the man's antecedents and without questioning his movements. But he had little doubt that there was a mystery of some kind that would bring a man of Ghent's apparent breeding into these lonely hills and again send him off periodically on what Lon well knew were debauches which carried Ghent Heaven knew where and into Heaven knew what company.

That Ghent seemed never to show the effects of these protracted sprees nor of the steady drinking that followed them was a matter calling for Lon's greatest admiration. Himself a hard drinker, with years of intensive training behind him, he admitted to himself that never

in his best days could he have equaled his employer.

These disappearances of Ghent's, Lon recalled, always followed long stretches of hard work at the mine which left the three men almost wrecks. Then Ghent, without a word to Lon or Burt, would set out with his horse and a few articles of camp equipment and be gone for days. Always he returned with a generous supply of liquor, which he would drink in solitude until it was gone, then he would once more attack the hidden store of gold in his mine and work like a man possessed until the craving again became too great for him to bear.

Only once had Lon spoken to Ghent regarding these periodical trips and the heavy drinking which followed them. When he ventured a remark that Ghent was "g-g-goin' p-p-putty heavy," Ghent's eyes had blazed, and he had retorted: "When I require the services of a nurse, I'll let you know. Until then, please mind your own damned business or else get out!" Consequently, as Lon put it, "th-th-that was th-th-that."

As far as Lon was aware, nobody knew when Ghent had come to that part of the country nor where he had come from. He paid good wages, supplied good grub and treated his men white, which, Lon told himself, after all, was all that concerned him. Continued association with Ghent, however, had brought him to the point of almost worshiping the taciturn man who, still in his early thirties, Lon would have regarded as a son had Ghent's manner permitted. His years of experience as a prospector enabled Lon to see that the claim on which Ghent had filed was extremely valuable and it irked him that the three of them were getting out the gold-bearing quartz in the crudest manner possible. He knew that with proper machinery and more help the output could be more than trebled.

He had mentioned this to Ghent and the latter had nodded absently and said:

“What would be the use, Lon? There's enough coming out now for us three. If anything happens to me, you and Burt can do as you please about it, but as long as I'm around, we'll go on as we're going. It isn't as though I had anybody else to think of.”

“B-b-but yuh m-m-might clean up yer p-p-
pile an g-g-go East t-t-tuh spend it,” Lon had
persisted.

“Go East!” Ghent had exclaimed. “Huh,
you’re crazy!” And the subject never had been
reopened.

Back in the shack, Burt was unhurriedly
cleaning up the accumulation of tin dishes and
cooking utensils and indulging in quiet and
somewhat free speculation regarding Ghent’s
movements. He was every bit as devoted to his
employer as Lon was, but, as the latter fre-
quently reminded him, he was “t-t-too dam’
y-y-young,” and given to “s-s-stickin’ his f-f-
fingers in other f-f-folks’ cawfee.”

“He musta bin gone all o’ three weeks,”
Burt soliloquized as he scrubbed at the frying
pan in a pail of greasy water set on the end
of the table, dropping everything to frantically
grab a pile of tinware which threatened to
topple onto the floor. “I’d like tuh follo’ him
sometime ’n see where he goes,” he went on,
digging with a thick thumb-nail at a particu-
larly stubborn spot on the frying pan. “I bet
I’d see a plenty tuh tell Lon.” And though

he had not realized it, he had been talking aloud, and as he made the last remark, Lon, having found everything snug at the mine, had quietly entered the shack in time to hear him.

"N-n-no, yuh wouldn't," he said quietly, as Burt, turning in surprise, knocked over the stack of dishes.

"Wouldn't what?" queried Burt, evidently embarrassed at being caught giving expression to undigested thought.

"Have a l-l-lot tuh t-t-tell me, if yuh f-f-fol-lered the b-b-boss aroun'. I heard yuh r-r-ravin'; c'd most hear yuh out on the t-t-trail," replied Lon.

"N-n-now, you l-l-lissen tuh me, B-b-burt Williams, and l-l-lissen good and p-p-plenty," he went on in all seriousness. "If ever yuh t-t-took it in yer f-f-fool head tuh foller the b-b-boss, an' s-s-spy on him, fer that's what it'ud b-b-be, yuh wouldn't have n-n-no chance tuh t-t-tell me n-n-nothin', 'cause if he d-d-didn't f-f-find yuh an' run yuh ragged, I'd ch-ch-chase yuh c-c-clean tuh C-c-californy, once yuh opened yer f-f-face tuh tell 'bout th' b-b-boss."

"Ah, don't git excited! I ain't started to foller him, have I?" said Burt weakly.

“N-n-no, an’ see as yuh d-d-don’t, neither,” was Lon’s answer. “You’re p-p-paid tuh m-m-mind yer own b-b-bus’ness an’ do yer work at the m-m-mine.”

“About this here mine?” queried Burt.

“W-w-well, what about it?” snapped Lon.

“Well, just this: s’posin’, jest s’posin’ some o’ these here times when the boss is away like he is now—what’s tuh prevent you and me from cleanin’ up on the mine an’ beatin’ it outa here?” And Burt looked at Lon narrowly.

“Only you and m-m-me,” answered Lon calmly, as he filled his pipe.

“Meanin’ what?”

“M-m-meanin’ I wouldn’t l-l-let yuh do it no m-m-more’n y-y-you’d l-l-let me do it—s-s-so there yuh are. S-s-say, what in hell p-p-put that intuh yer h-h-head, anyway? Yuh goin’ c-c-crazy’r s-s-somethin’.” And Lon spat in disgust.

“Well, I was jest a-wonderin’,” mused Burt, as he emptied the pail of greasy water through the open door and removed the flour sack that had somewhat unnecessarily served him as an apron.

“I was j-j-jest wonderin’ t-t-too,” replied

Lon, striking a match and raising it to his pipe.

“Wonderin’ what?” asked Burt, pausing as he crossed towards the big arm chair.

Lon held the match to his pipe and deliberately puffed the tobacco in the bowl into a red glow before answering, and Burt could see as each flare of the flame, fanned by the puffing, illuminated the good-humored wrinkled face of his companion, the keen eyes peering at him over the steel-bowed spectacles.

“When yuh’d g-g-git some s-s-sense.” And Lon threw the burnt match into the dying embers in the cook stove.

CHAPTER VII

FOR several minutes after Polly and Philip had driven away, followed by Win and the anxious boy, Ruth stood in the doorway of the ranch house, gazing far out over the desert. It was the first time she had been left alone since they had come to Arizona and she was glad. The last few weeks had seemed to her to be never-ending. Polly's continual complaining and utter uselessness had set her nerves just the least bit on edge, and now here was Win becoming somewhat importunate. Ruth sighed. She liked Win, but she knew that her feeling for him always would stop there. Now she was free—for one night, anyway, and she breathed deeply of the clear air.

Something in her sensitive nature responded to the wild untamed country to which they had come, and as she stood in the doorway her soul glowed within her. The sun was slowly sinking behind the distant hills, and the whole scene was bathed in purple and gold that hung like fairy gauze over the desert. As far as she

could see were countless new cactus blooms, coaxed from their hidden nests by the warm sun as it had traveled slowly across the sky; it seemed as though there were twice as many as on the day previous, and this ever-increasing blossoming of the wonderful blooms in the otherwise arid expanse, was a source of wonderment to the New England-bred girl.

Stepping to the edge of the porch, she flung out her arms as if to embrace the coming night, the odor of the desert blooms, and the desert itself. "What a night!" she whispered.

"What a glorious night! Who would dare to call this a desert, this golden ocean of flowers, soon to be turned to silver by the moonlight."

Deeply she inhaled the fragrant air, and as each breath sent the blood rushing through her body, inflaming her cheeks, she was stirred in a manner she had never before experienced. Somehow with the feeling that came over her, her thoughts turned to the "dream man" she had mentioned half in jest to Polly. And as she gave her thoughts free rein, she was ashamed . . . fearful lest some one might see her and perhaps guess the new awakening within her.

What was he really like, this dream man? Did he really exist and would they ever meet? Would she know him? He would be big, of course, and brimming with youth—strong, even rough, but a man. There was none among her acquaintances back home who fitted the rather meager description of her imagination. Certainly no man of this character had crossed her path out here in Arizona. In fact, aside from the somewhat nondescript male population of Mesa Grande and the Mexican ranch hands, the only men with whom she had come in contact were her brother and Win Newbury.

To Ruth, Win was a finished article, as she had often said, and this intangible something that had been developing in her ever since she came to Arizona, bursting forth in her loneliness at the ranch that night, craved some one far different from Win. Some one untamed, big, like the country, who would bring peace and contentment to her, even as the vastness and wildness of the desert had done, only in far greater and more lasting degree.

So quickly had this feeling come over her that she was startled; so much, in fact, that she hastily entered the house and lighted the lamp

on the living-room table. As the comfortable yellow glow lighted up the cheerful room, Ruth's eyes wandered to the mantel where a photograph of Newbury was resting, and, crossing to it, her eyes softening with a new tender pitying light, she said, half aloud: "I forgot, dear kind heart, how disappointed you are going to be."

Then, stepping back, she raised her arms above her head at the same time taking in a deep breath, after which she clasped her hands behind her head and stood gazing at the picture. Seriousness, pity, and finally amusement crossed her face rapidly as she mischievously pointed a finger at the photograph, saying: "Finished! finished!"

Whirling about, she again moved to the door and stood gazing out at the desert which by now, in that land of no twilight, was covered by a mysterious dark pall. She began to hum a tune, vaguely at first and in snatches, then in stronger rhythm until finally she burst forth in a deep-throated song:

Heart, wild heart,
Brooding apart,
Why dost thou doubt, and why art thou sullen?

Flower and bird
Wait but thy word—

As the last word was uttered, she turned and went to the table on which was a picture of her mother. She picked it up tenderly, almost with reverence, and gazed lovingly at it. Her eyes filled, and for a moment she almost remembered her loneliness, but something in that sweet face gazing back at her halted the tears that might have come and she smiled instead.

“Poor little mother! You look out at me with such anxious eyes,” she said. “Never mind, dear, there are better days coming for you, and it’s troublesome me that’s bringing them. Only trust me!”

The thoughts that the sight of the photograph brought back almost made her grow cold as she remembered the sensations she had experienced a little while before out on the veranda. The composed expression on her mother’s face recalled the family portraits that hung in the big living-room back there in New England, and she wondered if any of those stern-faced men and women ever had in their time felt or thought as she had just a few moments before.

Probably not. Romance was not a part of the Jordan tradition. Marriage, yes, but as a duty, as was the rearing of children that usually followed marriage with the Jordans. But romance? Never!

Years ago, perhaps, some of those Jordans, whose portraits hung in stately silence, had stood grim-faced as the stocks were placed about some unfortunate who had allowed romance to go unchecked, in the early days when a difference of opinion with those in power sometimes meant burning at the stake.

As she stood there looking at the photograph of her mother, Ruth in memory went over the portraits that hung in the Jordan living room and tried to select from the mental picture she carried of each, which, if any, it was who had at some time struck out, casting off the yoke of convention and doing things he wanted to do rather than the things he had been taught were right and proper. Whichever it was, his spirit was crying out to her this night.

Then suddenly remembering the song which she had left unfinished, she again broke softly into it, picking up the refrain where she had so suddenly ceased:

This is the hour,
And thine is the power,
Heart, high heart, be brave to begin it.
Dare you refuse?
Think what we lose!
Think what we gain—

Again the song ceased, keeping pace with her mood. This time it was the huge bunch of desert blooms on the table that attracted her attention. Her eyes closed, her lips parted involuntarily, the color heightened in her already flushed cheeks as she extended her hands to the flowers. At first her hands moved gently over the tops of the blooms, while she almost crooned the song. Then she grasped them fiercely, crushing them to her lips and saying as she did so: "Be still, you beauties! You'll drive me mad with your color and your odor. I'll take a hostage for your good behavior."

Selecting a vivid red bloom from the bunch, she crushed it to her breast and turned from the table. As she did so, her glance again fell on the photograph of Win Newbury and she was left cold.

But only for a moment. She quickly put Newbury out of her thoughts and again took

up her song which she now sang with wild abandon:

Heart which the cold
Long did enfold—
Hark, from the dark eaves the night thaw drummeth!
Now as a god,
Speak to the sod,
Cry to the sky that the miracle cometh!

With the end of the song, Ruth became almost weak. She staggered to the window overlooking the desert. The first pale rays of the moon lighted up the miles upon miles of waste, painting dark shadows on the sides of the distant hills, while away to the south a whitish vapor was lifted up and carried slowly on a gentle breeze—a canvas upon which the moon painted in all its splendor a radiance that shone like burnished silver.

The scene brought peace to the wrought soul of the girl, and over her there came a great expectancy that seemed almost to satisfy that feeling that was new to her, and which she did not fully understand. With a little laugh, she turned from the window and said: “What a scandal the moon is making out there in that great crazy world! Who but I could think of sleeping on such a night?”

From afar came the mournful cry of a coyote, which echoed and reëchoed until it sounded as though a pack of those slinking desert scavengers had suddenly descended upon the place. For a moment Ruth was startled, but as she listened and again heard the howl that had in it the wail of a lost soul, she smiled, and her eyes turned and rested on the rifle hanging on the wall just above the heavy pistol. She was not frightened, for that cry seemed to find response in her. All her life she had been protected from everything that did not conform to tradition, so that the glance at the weapons was involuntary. But in that cry she heard the call of a wild creature which enjoyed the freedom she had always craved and yet was only beginning to feel.

Light-heartedly, then, she turned from the living-room and passed into her own cheerful room where the moonlight was pouring in, casting fantastic shadows across the floor. So bright was it that she did not need to light the lamp which stood on the little table beside her bed. She picked up the letter and a book that had only that morning arrived from her mother.

Returning to the living room, she sat beside the table, and as she bent over the cactus blooms in the little pottery vase gently caressed her cheek, causing her to shake a finger at them, while her eyes almost said: "Don't! Don't!"



CHAPTER VIII

STEPHEN GHENT, soldier of fortune, prospector, mine owner and seeker after periodical excitement in which heavy drinking and low company apparently were necessary ingredients, sat at a table in the patio of the little inn at Mesa Grande. He had been drinking steadily for nearly three weeks and showed it. He was a big man, tall, broad-shouldered, but carrying no superfluous weight. A handsome man he might have been but for the fact that constant dissipation had placed its mark on what was the face of a strong man deliberately allowing himself to run down hill.

With him were two gentlemen-about-town, somewhat vaguely known as Dutch and Shorty. It was an ill-assorted trio and Ghent, as he studied them with drink-obscured eyes, was not proud of his companions. Still, they served to pass the time; they were somebody to drink with and talk to, so he tolerated them.

He had made their acquaintance on one of

his periodical debauches, by the simple expedient of inviting them to have a drink which neither they nor he needed but which as a matter of principle they did not refuse. They had amused him, Dutch with his loud-mouthed braggadocio and Shorty with an unconscious humor, and it had become Ghent's habit to look them up whenever he started on one of his sprees. He could always depend upon them to stay with him as long as his money lasted, and they were easy to locate. All Ghent had to do was to make the rounds of the saloons and dance halls in the few nearby mining towns. In one or another he was sure to find them.

They were a mystery to Ghent and it amused him to try to puzzle them out. Neither had any visible means of livelihood other than his own legs or the legs of his somewhat disillusioned cow pony. Yet each managed to live and supply himself with liquor in large quantities, although neither seemed to have any money, at least when Ghent was around.

Dutch was a big man, as large as Ghent, and heavier, with a mass of uncombed blond hair and queer, bloodshot, beady eyes, one of which

he habitually carried half closed. His face was coarse and inflamed by drink and he seemed always to have a three-days' growth of beard. His mouth was large and full with a lower lip that sagged lower and lower the more liquor he drank.

He wore the outfit of a cow hand, leather chaps, peaked sombrero, fancy waistcoat, and a huge six-shooter carried in a holster close to his right hand. By the casual observer, he might have been considered picturesque, but the picturesqueness would soon wear off, as it seemed to be doing with Ghent on this particular night.

There was nothing of the romantic cowboy about Shorty. He was dirty. He wore a ragged vest, trousers that might have fitted somebody, but did not fit him, and a black sombrero that had evidently been stolen from some rancher in the dim past. It was sweat-marked to a dirty yellow above the band, and had a decided patent leather shine where Shorty's greasy fingers had worn off the nap. His eyes popped from his head as though in continual surprise at something or other, and his straggly gray black hair looked as if it had

never been introduced to a comb since he had been wearing it on his head.

Shorty's passion was "rolling the bones," and for convenience and surety he had two sets of dice, one honest, for the use of any one; the other not so honest for use in emergencies, and he was adept at slipping the crooked dice into the game. Having accomplished this, his crooked mouth would twist into a smile and show his heavy stained teeth.

As he looked at his companions, Ghent wore an expression of cynical amusement. He wondered at himself for being in such company, but that insatiable thirst for liquor was not to be denied, and as he was not a solitary drinker, he must have companionship, and companions for steady week in and week out drinking were not subject to the closest sort of scrutiny.

Ghent was just as much of a mystery to Shorty and Dutch as they were to him. They often discussed him between themselves and wondered where he got his money, of which he seemed to have plenty. On occasions, they had seen him exchange nuggets for cash, and it was a source of worry to them that they could

never pry out of Ghent anything concerning himself.

Of the three, Ghent was easily the most picturesque. In addition to his clean-cut general appearance, well-molded features, and unusually kindly eyes, that nevertheless had a way of narrowing to mere slits when he was aroused, he wore clothes that made him stand apart from every other man in the patio. Whipcord riding breeches, perfectly tailored and the envy of Shorty; high lace boots that fitted his feet and legs as though molded on; a heavy dark plaid shirt with a silk kerchief around the neck. On his head he wore a broad-brimmed, high-crowned, black Stetson. Strapped around his waist was the well-filled cartridge belt, supporting a holster with—not the usual six-shooter, but a regulation army automatic, such as officers carry.

The three men had been attracted to the inn at Mesa Grande by the sound of wild, passionate Mexican dance music that came faintly to their ears as they were riding along on the trail. They had left San Jacinto, a mining town about ten miles away, because things had

begun to get slow and they were headed for any place that might offer more entertainment. Shorty heard it first and he pulled up his horse suddenly, saying: "Whassat?" They all listened and finally decided that it was music, and where there was music there must of necessity be lights, laughter and liquor, as well as women. "Let's go!" Ghent had cried, at the same time turning his horse and heading for Mesa Grande, closely followed by the others, who would just as readily have followed him anywhere as long as his money held out. Arriving at the inn, they had secured a table where they were supplied with the liquor and food they ordered. All about them was a scene of wild joy. It was fiesta time, and the natives, who were nearly all of the mixed Mexican type, usually found along the southwestern border, were celebrating with wild abandon. At one side of the patio, on a raised platform, four couples were dancing a fandango to the accompaniment of the orchestra sitting well back toward the rear of the platform. All wore the picturesque Spanish dress, the women in gay skirts and bodices with gorgeous shawls thrown about them, their hair worn high on

the head with comb and mantilla. The men wore bright velvet suits, short jackets, gaudy silk shirts, and heavily braided trousers with the flaring bell bottoms slit up the outer seam for several inches, revealing silk and gold embroidery. On their heads were the high peaked rolled brimmed sombreros, typically Spanish, heavily ornamented with gold and silver.

The scene was one riotous bedlam of color, garlic, wild music and sinuous swaying of bodies as all kept time to the music from the platform, and snapping their fingers or clapping their hands to the clicking of the castanets in the hands of the dancers.

Ghent displayed more interest in the crowd about him than he did in the dancers. On one side was a Mexican caballero making love to a blushing señorita, while on the other was a fat little man eating frijoles as if his life depended upon finishing the dish within a time-limit.

Shorty and Dutch ate the food that was placed before them, but Ghent scarcely touched it. Dutch would take a huge handful of the tamale from his plate and stuff it into his mouth, wiping his fingers on his shirt. Shorty did likewise and it was not long, with this

wholesale stoking of food, before they were both satiated, and could give thought to what was going on around them. Dutch leaned back in his chair, contented, happy, and allowed his gaze to drift around the patio. But his eyes always came back to a point directly above where he was sitting, and finally he caught the owner of a pair of very black eyes smiling at him over the edge of a fan from her seat on the solana above. He smiled in his best manner, his mouth looking like a huge slit in an underripe pumpkin, and then by signs invited the lady to descend from her place on the gallery and join him at the table. With a discreet nod she indicated the two men at the table with her, holding animated discussion and apparently paying no attention to her. Leaning well over, she was able to whisper, half aloud, rolling her eyes towards one of the two men, "Mia oosband."

That he had attracted the attention of a lady, the possessor of a more or less perfectly good husband, tickled the vanity of Dutch, and he leaned across the table to tell Ghent of his conquest. Shorty naturally heard also, and almost immediately glanced up. It was a fatal mis-

take. For, just as Dutch leaned over the table to speak to Ghent, the husband of the Spanish woman turned from his male companion in time to catch his wife straightening up. Glancing over the railing of the solana, the fiery little man gazed into the upturned face of Shorty. With a quick movement he gathered up a half-eaten tamale from his plate, and flung it downward with a curse hissed between his teeth.

The tamale found its mark on the upturned face of Shorty, striking him squarely on the forehead, and distributing its hot dressing of chili into both of his eyes. Half blinded and in a liquor-fired rage, Shorty frantically scraped the mess from his face, and dug it out of his eyes, swearing viciously while Dutch and Ghent laughed heartily. His eyes cleared, Shorty jerked his gun from the holster, and would have fired up at the little Spaniard who was leaning over the railing shaking his fist, if he had not been restrained by his companions, who calmed him by placing another drink in his hand.

At this time there entered the patio none other than Señor Dominguez, a leading Mexi-

can resident of Mesa Grande, small, fat and proud as a peacock, for he had Señorita Dolores Fuente on his arm, and to have Señorita Dolores on one's arm was a mark of distinction in Mesa Grande. On they came, approaching the table at which Ghent, Dutch and Shorty were seated. With a wink at Ghent who was nearest to the oncoming pair, Dutch moved his chair so that his crossed feet extended into the aisle. Señor Dominguez came first, bowing right and left, and as he was passing, Dutch, with a quick movement of his foot, tripped the little man, who fell in a heap.

Ghent, as the Spaniard fell, arose, seized Dolores in his arms, and quickly kissed her not unwilling lips, for if Dolores had one passion it was for big strong "gringos." Tightly he held her, while Dutch, observing him, picked up the little Señor Dominguez, and turned him so that his back was toward Ghent. Boiling with rage, Dominguez hurled a mixture of Spanish and English at Dutch for daring to trip him up, to which Dutch responded in mock contrition.

Oblivious to the passionate embrace in which the fair Dolores was being held, Dominguez

continued to upbraid Dutch, shaking his finger in the face of the big man, causing him to draw back in well simulated terror. Occasionally glancing back to see how Ghent was doing with the girl, Dutch finally decided that things had gone far enough, so he seized Dominguez by the shoulders, lifted him as if he were a baby, and hurled him to the other side of the patio.

Then he strode toward Ghent and, pushing him to one side, grabbed the girl himself, turning her towards him, after which, first wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, he planted a kiss on the unobjecting lips of the girl.

By this time, the place was in an uproar. There were present many Mexicans and Spaniards, who resented the treatment of a leading citizen like Señor Dominguez, and as if by common impulse there was a general movement towards the three Americanos. Ghent, sensing trouble, grabbed Dutch by the arm, pulled him away from the blushing Dolores, and followed by Shorty, headed for the yard where they had left their horses.

Passing close to the platform, Ghent mounted it, to better observe the crowd. Then as Dutch

and Shorty came abreast of the dancers, they fell into a burlesque of the fandango, so much to the amusement of the gathering that for a moment hostility was forgotten. Ghent beat time with his hands following every gyration of Dutch and Shorty, laughing heartily.

Finally, tired by their exertion, Dutch and Shorty, holding to each other, fell backwards onto the platform. As their antics ceased, the crowd once more came towards them, and Ghent herded the other two before him toward the horses.

Knocking a hat off here, snatching a kiss there, or playfully pulling a big sombrero down over the eyes of its owner, the three men finally reached their horses, mounted, and instead of riding out the way they had come in, they dashed across the patio, scattering señoritas and caballeros right and left. Straight at a table rode Ghent, and while Shorty and Dutch went around it he leaped his horse over the table and the half drunken men seated at it.

Out through the narrow door in the patio wall the riders galloped, and the crowd, recovering from the unexpected dash of the three horsemen, ran after them, hurling sticks,

stones, and strange Spanish and Mexican oaths after the retreating figures.

At this moment, the gaudily dressed police of Mesa Grande came running up, their swords flashing, and their medals clinking with each step. It was with an inward feeling of relief they learned that the cause of the trouble, three hard-riding American plainsmen, had gone and were fortunately too far away to permit of pursuit.

For a mile or two from the town, Ghent, Shorty and Dutch rode as fast as their horses could carry them, knowing that capture meant rather severe punishment, as the Mexican and Spaniard takes his pleasure seriously, and not as something to be tossed around by three half-drunken gringos.

Finally, they pulled their horses down to a walk, and then they had a good long laugh over the escapade, after which they silently headed east, not knowing or caring what lay ahead of them or where they went.

CHAPTER IX

“ANYBODY follerin’ us, Shorty? Look behind an’ see, will yuh?” asked Dutch, as he, Shorty and Stephen Ghent, following their riotous exit from the fiesta at Mesa Grande, were slowly riding along the trail, mounted on their wiry cow ponies.

“Naw,” answered Shorty, as he peered back over the trail, which shone in the moonlight like a ribbon of white. “What ’n ’ell would anybody wanta foller us fer?”

“Dunno, best tuh be sure,” answered Dutch as he wiped a dirty hand across the thick-lipped mouth. Then as he glanced towards Ghent who rode in silence, head down, Dutch said: “Give us a drink, Steve. What ’n ’ell ails yuh, anyway? Yuh ain’t hardly spoke sence we left the party. Whassamatter, that Mex dame look good t’ yuh back there?” And the drunken Dutch lurched over in his saddle and struck Ghent a wallop on the shoulder with his broad hand.

"No," answered Ghent, as he passed his flask of liquor to Dutch. "She was all right, but I forget 'em as soon as I leave 'em." Then watching the flask he continued: "Just a moment, please, Dutch, leave a little of that in case of emergency." And he reached over and took the flask from the big fellow's hand, spilling a little of the fluid on the other's chin as he pulled the bottle away.

Dutch made a frantic and half-humorous attempt to gather up the liquor from his chin and scoop it into his mouth. Shorty laughed loudly at this.

"Them Mex'es is all right," said Dutch as he again wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, "but for me, gimme a white woman ever' time. I'm sick of these here brown-skinned she devils, who'd soon knife yuh in the back as look at yuh. No, sir, me, I prefers 'em white . . . and the whiter they come the better I likes 'em. Yes, sir—that's me."

"What am I supposed to do?" asked Ghent. "Run out somewhere and find you a nice white woman?" This last with just a tinge of sarcasm.

"Not fur me, brother," quickly retorted

Dutch. "I'll do my own findin' and when I finds 'em, I takes 'em. Yes, sir, that's me." And he glared at Ghent as though seeking a challenge to his statement.

"I met my love on the Al-a-mo-o-o-o," sang Shorty at the top of his voice. "I met——"

"Shut up, will yuh, yuh damn fool. Do you want tuh tell ever'body where we're at?" And Dutch glared at Shorty, who subsided as quickly as he had broken into his song.

"Where 'n 'ell we goin'?" asked Shorty, struck with an idea. "We can't get no liquor over this away; nearest town's a coupla days' ride."

"What do you care?" asked Dutch. "Jest foller Steve and me, and yuh'll have a helluva lot o' fun. Won't he, Steve?" And Dutch laughed heartily.

Ghent did not respond. He was not exactly in a laughing mood; his companions had begun to grate on him. True, they would do in a pinch as drinking companions, but somehow Dutch, with his boisterous laughter, and his overbearing ways, was beginning to annoy him, and Shorty, with his ever-ready dice, had the same effect on him as a dog that

snapped and snarled at his heels, yet which might, under circumstances, be more or less companionable.

Slowly they jogged ahead, that oddly-assorted trio; Ghent practically alone with his thoughts, the others exchanging coarse jests, trite and without point, and mostly obscene which showed exactly where their thoughts lay most of the time. On and on they rode, stopping frequently to drink from the flask that Ghent carried. They did not know that he had obtained a full one before leaving Mesa Grande, and had determined that when the present flask was empty, there would be no more liquor.

Suddenly ahead of them on the trail they beheld a cloud of dust coming toward them rapidly. Ghent, his eyes accustomed to distances, peered intently and was able to discern two riders coming at a furious pace. Shorty and Dutch were inclined to be panicky, although the riders were coming in the opposite direction from Mesa Grande. They dodged behind a growth of mesquite, leaving Ghent sitting on his horse, at one side of the trail, to give the oncomers every opportunity to pass unhin-

dered, for he realized that only a matter of grave importance could cause them to travel so fast.

As the riders came almost abreast of him, Ghent discovered that one was a mere boy, while the other was plainly an Easterner, judging by his conventional riding outfit, and across his saddle was hanging a double saddle bag, having all the appearance of belonging to a medical man. The two riders dashed past Ghent without slackening speed, and the only sign either gave was a quick wave of the hand from the man. Ghent mechanically returned the greeting, and Dr. Win Newbury and the boy rode off into the night clouds of the white dust from the trail curling up back of them in the moonlight.

"Come out, my brave companions," laughed Ghent, sarcastically. "The danger is past. Nothing shall hurt my little playmates now."

"Can that stuff, Steve!" said Dutch as he and Shorty rode out on the trail. "Yuh can't tell who rides over the desert these times. Like as not it might 'a been the sheriff."

"Dodging a sheriff, are you?" queried Ghent,

peering at Dutch quizzically. "What have you done now?"

"Not a damn thing, have we, Shorty?" and Dutch looked quickly towards Shorty for substantiation of his statement.

"Naw, not a thing," answered Shorty, with a hangdog glance at Ghent. "But jessa same, nothin' ever happens on this desert hereabouts but what's blamed on me and Dutch." And Shorty stuck his chest out as though proud that he and his companion had reputations that brought them to official notice at the discovery of any new depredation.

"I suppose so," replied Ghent, still with that same tinge of sarcasm. "I was always told to pick good, clean, upstanding companions. Now that I have discovered how spotless you both are, my conscience is greatly relieved, and I, too, shall take to a hiding place the next time a couple of strangers ride out of the night towards us, for there is no telling who it might be. Perhaps the shades of some departed ancestors or the ghost of a miner trying to show us where there is a thick vein of virgin gold hidden along here somewhere."

After making this speech, which was a little longer than most of those he directed at his companions, Ghent watched keenly to note the effect it had on them. Shorty did not have the slightest idea what he was talking about. He merely leaned forward and pretended to fix his bridle. Dutch glared at Ghent with an unfriendly gleam in his eye.

"I ain't sure what yuh mean, Steve, but yuh sound right onfriendly," he said, closing one eye and peering at Steve with a broad grin covering his face. "An' say," Dutch kicked his horse closer to Ghent, "yuh jest made mention of virgin gold. How come yuh never let me and Shorty come visit yuh at yer mine?" And Dutch sat back and beamed on Ghent.

"How do you know that I have a mine?" retorted Ghent, holding the other's eyes with his own. "I never said so, did I?"

"No, yuh didn't," admitted Dutch. "But I seen yuh pay for drinks with nuggets, and I knows yuh don't pick 'em offen the ground—and it was pure virgin gold, too." And Dutch nodded his head, as though to further emphasize the fact.

Ghent grinned without making further an-

swer, then wheeled his horse onto the trail and moved along, Shorty and Dutch falling in behind. Occasionally the cry of a coyote would awaken the stillness, and the melancholy note would strike a responsive chord in the breast of Ghent, and bring Shorty and Dutch to the height of their profanity, aimed and directed at their four-footed brother.

After an hour's slow plodding over the desert, not knowing or caring where they were going, the three men began slowly to climb a slight rise in the trail. It was a very gradual rise, scarcely noticeable, and would have occasioned no comment but for the fact that Shorty, unable longer to stay awake with all the liquor he was carrying, had dozed and fallen off his horse. As he struck the ground, hardly knowing what had happened, he jerked his gun loose and looked for trouble. All he saw was the grinning faces of Ghent and Dutch looking down at him. Then it dawned on him that he had been asleep, so, feeling very sheepish, he mounted his horse in silence and the trio went on its aimless way.

Passing over the summit of the slight rise, the three riders at almost the same time dis-

covered in the distance, the lights shining from the window of the Jordan ranch house, and each instinctively quickened his pace, as though expecting to find something for which he had been searching. Dutch drew his big gun from its scabbard and spun the cylinder, while Shorty took his dice from his pocket and clicked them together in the palms of his hands. Ghent felt within his shirt for the full flask of liquor that was always an entrée to the best society in the desert country.

As they neared the fence of the ranch, they slackened speed as though by common impulse, for although hospitality was the watchword in the country through which they were traveling, caution was not to be overlooked, lest they might ride into a camp that was not exactly friendly towards strangers coming from nowhere out of the night. Slowly, therefore, they rode up to the fence and halted in the black shadow cast by the ranch house.

Shorty studied the windows through which the lights shone from the house and as he continued to gaze almost fascinated, Dutch pushed his horse closer to him and said: "Waal, what d'yuh make out, huh?"

“Take a look yerself,” said Shorty, pointing towards the living-room window of the house, “and see what yuh kin see.”

Dutch gazed off toward the window indicated by Shorty, and what he saw made him gasp and cast a quick glance at Ghent, who apparently was showing no interest whatever in the proceedings, and say:

“Look, Steve! Look!”

Ghent urged his horse forward slowly and took his place beside the others, after which he turned his eyes to follow the great hairy arm of Dutch which pointed in the direction of the lighted window of the ranch house.

As he looked through the window of the ranch house, he felt something within him snap; he did not know what it was, but over him there came a feeling that he could not account for or explain.

Suddenly he seemed to be in another life. Through his whisky-soaked brain, for Ghent had drunk his share, there ran in fantastic formation vivid scenes of a life he seemed to remember vaguely, not as being a part of it, but rather as something that he had perhaps read about. His brain reeled; he thought it

was the effect of the liquor, and he inwardly cursed it. Then he heard a dull rumble that seemed to come from afar, like thunder in the distance, heralding the coming of a storm. His brain cleared for the moment, and he discovered the sound he thought to be thunder was the monotonous tones of Shorty and Dutch who were discussing plans for the immediate future, their eyes glued on the window of the ranch house living-room.

Ghent tried to think connectedly and a sudden movement from Dutch as he slid off his horse brought him suddenly to a half sense of what was going on. He watched the man as he slowly climbed over the fence and stood on the other side, his eyes always on the window. What was Dutch going to do? Something rotten, of course, but what could he do about it? Should he go along or should he——?

Within the ranch house, seated at the table in the living room, Ruth Jordan was reading the book that her mother had sent from the East. She had been reading ever since she had brought the book and her mother's letter from her bedroom some time previous. Time after

time, sleep would attack her; she would yawn in spite of every effort to keep awake and enjoy the book, but it was of little use. She was sleepy and the feeling which had descended upon her after the others had gone had left her weak. Realizing that to attempt further reading would be merely the physical act without the proper mental absorption, she at last decided to give it up and go to bed.

Rising from her place at the table, she went first to the door and stood silhouetted, drinking in the fragrance of the night. With a final deep inhalation, she turned, closed the door and locked it and went to her own room to prepare for bed.

Slowly, deliberately, she went about this intimate task, removing her outer garments, revealing the pristine whiteness of her body unaware of the eyes that stared in at her from the ranch yard.

Outside, Shorty and Dutch viewed all this with a rising of beastly passions that they scarcely could restrain, while Ghent, who also saw, was moved by a feeling akin to awe that he could not explain. As he glanced at Shorty and Dutch, and noted the bestial expression on



their faces, his jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed into mere slits.

Back in the bedroom Ruth had slipped her nightgown over her head and was standing now before her bureau, brushing her wonderful golden hair, her white arms gleaming in the lamplight, her face and breast reflected in the mirror.

Shorty, unable to control himself longer, would have dashed for the house had not Dutch laid a detaining hand on his arm, saying: "Hold yer hosses! Don't spoil it. There's plenty of time."

Ghent, prospector, miner and sometime drunkard companion of these two—felt mean and small as he contemplated himself there in the guise of a peeping Tom, spying on a girl apparently alone in the ranch house, and he could cheerfully have killed Dutch and Shorty in their tracks. In fact, his hand moved toward the butt of his automatic, but just then a movement of Ruth's drew his attention back to her.

Having finished brushing her hair, the girl moved toward the bed and knelt in prayer. Ghent turned away, deaf to the profanely jeer-

ing mutterings of his companions, knowing he had no right to be there, loathing himself for staying, yet unable to leave—waiting—waiting for something that his half-cleared brain could not wholly comprehend.

Her prayers ended, Ruth arose from her knees and discovered that the light in the living-room was still burning. She went to extinguish it and, as she passed through the door, six eyes followed and remained fastened on her as she blew out the flame and stood for a moment, revealed in the pale moonlight that streamed through the side window of the living room, shadowy, wraith-like, elusively beautiful.

Returning to her own room, Ruth quickly extinguished the lamp on the stand, and jumped into bed, pulling the covers over her.

It was then that Dutch, freed from the tenseness that had held him while the girl was preparing for bed, moved forward toward the bedroom window, stepping carefully, lest a piece of hard adobe be disturbed and warn the girl, until, in a moment, he had reached the wall of the house, a little to one side of the window.

The mood that had come upon Ruth and

remained with her during the evening, had left her restless and, although she had been drowsy while she was reading, now that she finally had retired, she was unable to sleep and her mind reverted to the change that had so suddenly come over her.

Peering quietly around the edge of the window, Dutch was just in time to see her throw off a portion of the covering and readjust her pillow. He quickly dodged back and collided with Shorty who had followed close at his heels.

“What’s she doin’ now?” Shorty queried in a hoarse whisper.

“Sh-sh-sh——!” cautioned Dutch, as he turned from the window to wave a restraining hand. Then back to the window went his eyes and he saw the girl lying with one arm outside the covers, her face turned away from him.

Silently, save for labored breathing, Dutch contemplated his intended victim, his mouth working convulsively as he mentally ran his coarse fingers through that gorgeous hair; his fingers, picking nervously at his pendulous lower lip, which hung far down, revealing two rows of tightly-clenched teeth.

“Gonna hog th’ hull show yerself?” asked

Shorty impatiently and a little louder this time; and again Dutch turned from the window to caution his companion to be more discreet.

“Sh-sh-sh——!” he repeated, soothingly, and as he turned, he left one hand resting on the window sill.

Perhaps it was her mood which still persisted; perhaps she half heard the voice of Shorty, but at that moment Ruth turned in her bed and caught a glimpse of the hairy arm as Dutch slowly withdrew it.

Terror seized her. She knew the arm could not belong to Win. It would have been impossible for him to have returned by that time. And, anyway, he would not spy on her through her bedroom window. Philip, she well knew, was miles from the ranch, making what speed he could through the cool night, still farther away. No, the arm could belong only to a marauder. How long had he been there outside her window; what had he seen? What could she do, alone in the house, miles from any possible help?—— Ah, the guns! The guns in the other room! She must get them!

These thoughts followed one another rapidly

through Ruth's mind. From her position in the bed, she could plainly see the door leading from the living-room to the porch. The door-knob, a brown porcelain affair, polished from much handling, reflected a little patch of moonlight and, under this faint illumination, she saw it turn as though it was being tried from the outside.

Then she heard the dull thud as of a body being thrown heavily against the door, which shook under the impact, but held fast. She sprang from the bed to run for a weapon, but at that moment, the door burst open with a crash and, as she stood terrified beside the bed, two men stumbled into the room beyond, guns flashing as they prepared to overcome any possible resistance.

CHAPTER X

SATISFIED that the girl was alone in the house, Dutch and Shorty put up their guns, and surveyed the room. From where he stood Dutch could see into the bedroom, where Ruth stood cowering beside the bed, almost paralyzed with fright.

Ghent meanwhile had taken his place in the doorway, concealed from Ruth by the door that swung loosely on its hinges. Dutch went at once to the table and, striking a match, flooded the room with the soft yellow light of the lamp. As he was turning from the table, his eyes rested upon the vase of desert flowers. He picked them up and slowly advanced toward the bedroom.

Ruth, terrified, drew back as Dutch approached, and as he entered the room she screamed.

"Sh-sh——! No noise, now, little 'un! Ever'-thin's all right an' nice," he said in what he intended to be a soothing tone, as he reached the foot of her bed and rested his arms on it.

"C'mon, git up an' entertain some frien's like a good girl," he went on, at the same time reaching over to grasp her by the arm.

Ruth screamed and drew away from him. Then as she realized that her arms and breast were bare, she snatched her dressing gown from the chair beside the bed and drew it around her.

"Don't cover up, 's all right, we're all frien's. See, I brung yuh a bokay!" And Dutch held out the bunch of cactus blooms he had taken from the table.

"Please go away, please!" pleaded the girl, as the tears welled up in her eyes.

"Don't cry! 'Sno use t'cry! Aw, c'mon, le's be good frien's! C'mon, what d'yuh say?" And Dutch lurched towards her, the flowers held out before him.

"I saw yuh brushin' yer perty hair. Don't have t'do that when I'm round; I'll do it fer yuh an' glad tuh. C'mon, let's be fren's." But Ruth was ready for the sudden lunge Dutch made, and before he recovered his balance she had taken refuge behind a chair on the opposite side of the room.

Pleading, coaxing, Dutch again advanced



with the flowers held out to her, but she drew back in horror as she viewed closely the bestial countenance so close to her; the stubble of beard, the seamed face, the cruel mouth, and the hard eyes, and above all else, the reek of liquor. Once this creature reached her, she knew she would be helpless.

Seeing her chance, she suddenly made a quick leap through the door to the living-room and was frantically trying to reach the rifle that hung just far enough above her head to prevent her securing it before Dutch had her in his grasp. Ruth struggled against the strength of the man and tried vainly to reach the rifle, but he pulled her away and held her in his arms, with her back to him.

The feel of her soft body under the muscles of his arms almost maddened Dutch, and he tried to turn her so that he could implant a kiss upon her face. But in a frenzy born of terror, and in spite of the repugnance she felt, Ruth leaned suddenly over and grasped one of the arms that held her with her sharp, white teeth.

With a howl of rage, Dutch loosed his hold and Ruth dashed from the room, only to fall

into the grasp of Shorty, who had been impatiently watching her struggle with Dutch, waiting for his own chance to come.

Shorty's eager arms grasped the girl and dragged her back into the living-room, where he made frantic efforts to kiss her. But Ruth struggled and kept turning her head from side to side, at the same time beating on Shorty's chest with her fists.

Still holding his injured arm, Dutch approached the struggling pair, saying: "C'mon, gal, be sociable, will yuh?" Then as she continued to struggle in the grasp of the other man, Dutch himself entered the fray, and tried to push Shorty away.

"Git away, she's as much mine 's she's yourn," wailed Shorty as the superior strength of Dutch broke his hold on the girl. But Dutch, his blood boiling with desire for her, pushed him away, and eagerly gathered the girl again in his arms. He tried to kiss her, but, as before, she struggled and kept turning her face away from his, so he satisfied himself by running his coarse fingers through her hair and burying his face in it. Then as he could not reach her lips with his own, he buried his head

on her shoulder, and sunk his teeth hungrily but gently into the white flesh of her neck.

At this, Ruth, in one frantic effort, managed to free herself from his grasp and dashed for the door, only to crash into Ghent, who had stood silently watching every move of his two companions.

The shock brought Ghent out of the half stupor which had enveloped him ever since he first saw the girl through the window, and as he gazed upon her, he bowed and removed his hat, saying pleasantly: "Good evening!"

Surprised at finding a third man, Ruth instinctively recoiled and, slinking back against the wall near the door in a corner formed by the wall and a cabinet, she turned and gazed almost fascinated as Dutch and Shorty advanced together upon her, desire written in every line of their repulsive features. On they came, step by step; not a word was spoken, no sound except the labored breathing of the two men as they crept toward their prey.

At bay and almost on the point of losing her mind, Ruth turned and glanced at Ghent, who stood there silent, one foot on the door sill, the other well into the room as though he had

halted suddenly while making a step; one hand on the door frame, the other hooked by a thumb to his belt, near the butt of his automatic.

Something within the soul of Ruth Jordan warmed as she gazed at Ghent, hand ready at the holster; what it was she did not know, but in him she saw a possible salvation.

Turning quickly she panted: "Save me! save me!"

Ghent looked at the girl, as if he was not sure that he had heard her correctly. He then glanced quickly towards Shorty and Dutch, who at this unexpected turn, had stopped short in their tracks and stood watching him and the girl.

Their plans suddenly changed by this new development, Shorty and Dutch exchanged glances. Then to Shorty there came a thought, and from his greasy vest he brought forth his dice and said to Dutch.

"C'mon, we'll shake fer her; all of us; free for all! What'd yuh say?"

"It's all right with me," answered Dutch. "Come on, Steve, curse yuh, you're in this too."

Ghent had been looking intently at the girl,

and as her words soaked into his brain, he didn't quite understand, so he took a step nearer to her, as she again spoke, this time saying: "Save me, and I will make it up to you!"

As he stopped in his tracks and gazed at her in amazement, she pantingly went on: "Don't touch me! Listen! Save me from these others—and from yourself, and I will pay you—with my life."

Shorty and Dutch exchanged glances, the former picked up the pottery vase from the table and loudly shook the dice in it.

"With your life?" Ghent asked in dull wonder.

"Yes," answered the girl, "with all I am or can be."

"What do you mean?" he asked, puzzled. Then as a certain understanding dawned on him, he continued: "You mean you'll go with me—out of this? Stick to me—on the square?"

"Yes," replied Ruth in a tragic whisper.

Ghent, unable to believe what he heard, could only repeat:

"On the dead square?"

To which Ruth again answered: "Yes,"

weakly, for the reaction of the terrifying experience had set in; she felt faint, and even yet this man, this stranger with the not unhandsome face, had not agreed to her proposal.

Ghent, unmindful of the hostile glances from Shorty and Dutch, still pondered, groping blindly in an intellect dulled by weeks of continuous drinking, for some explanation of this strange position in which he found himself. But he could only say dully: "You won't change your mind and spoil it?"

"No," answered the girl, as she straightened involuntarily, her eyes flashing at the implied doubt in his question.

Long he held her eyes with his own, and as he gazed Stephen Ghent knew that in that moment he was reborn, and something in the breast of the girl instinctively responded and brought her a feeling of hope.

"Give me your hand on it!" said Ghent, and his voice was strangely calm. As Ruth laid her small hand in his big one, she felt the same thrill that had come to her earlier in the evening when she had caressed the desert flowers, resting in the pottery vase, the vase which Shorty now shook violently with one hand

while in the other he carelessly dangled his six-shooter.

Ghent, attracted by the sound of the rattling dice, looked over at Shorty and Dutch and saw that each held his gun in readiness. Ghent smiled coldly as he strode towards them.

"Shorty an' me's sittin' in this game, and interested. Ain't we, Shorty?" said Dutch as Ghent reached the table.

Then reaching over, he took the vase from Shorty and held it out to Ghent, saying: "Shake fer her!" And with a deft motion he slipped his gun back into its holster.

"Shake how?" asked Ghent, apparently sparring for time. "How'll we shake?" He held Dutch in a cold glance.

"Any damn way yuh please! Sole and exclusive rights to the li'l angel," with a horrible leer at Ruth who still cowered against the wall. Then as his glance came back to Ghent, he continued: "License tuh love an' cherish on th' premises, an' to wit notwithstandin' whatever that is."

Ghent mechanically took the proffered vase and shook the dice in it reflectively, both Shorty and Dutch eyeing him closely the while.

He was about to throw when an idea came to him and he placed the vase on the table. Then he slowly shook his head, while from his pockets he took a small roll of bills and a handful of loose silver which he tossed on the table, saying: "That's all I've got in my clothes. Take it, and give me a free field, will you?"

"Yuh don't mean me, Steve," replied Dutch, without glancing at the money which Shorty had gathered up and was busy counting. And feeling that perhaps he could dispose of one of them Ghent turned on Shorty and said: "Well, you, then!"

But Shorty laid the money back on the table and pushed it away from him, shaking his head, and replied: "Nope, I'm goin' tuh stay in th' game, too."

Dutch laughed boisterously at this and then glancing at the girl, he said with a sneer: "Don't blame yuh much, Shorty! A ornery buck of a dirt-eatin' Mojave'd pay more'n that fer his squaw."

Ruth winced, and no slave on an auction block ever felt the humiliation that was visited upon this high-strung New England girl as

she stood cowering, while three ruffians of the desert bid for her body. She gazed at Ghent's broad back and in those square shoulders she sensed protection, and somehow there came over her a certain feeling of security, faint, it is true, but definite. Once again her attention was attracted to the table where the three men stood, and she heard Ghent's voice saying: "Of course I know it isn't much money, but it is all the cash I have with me." Then, struck by a thought, he suddenly put his hand within his shirt and drew over his head a leather thong strung with heavy nuggets of gold.

"How about this, then?" he asked as he threw it on the table. Dutch did not even look at it; his eyes were on the girl. Shorty, however, eagerly grasped it and gazed in fascination at the little hard nuggets that meant much liquor and easy living once he could exchange them for the money they were worth.

"Take that and clear out," snarled Ghent, as he saw that Shorty was weakening.

"I've give yuh fair warnin', Steve," Dutch growled, his hand on his gun. "My chance ain't fer sale."

"All right," replied Ghent, with a grim smile, "but we'll keep everything friendly between us. A square stand-up shoot, and the best man takes her."

"Now yer sayin' somp'n!" replied Dutch.

Ghent turned to Shorty, who was weighing the string of nuggets in his hand.

"Now, it's up to you, and you'd better make up your mind quick, because Dutch and I have a lot of business to attend to." Ghent was coming back; his brain, fired by the happenings of the past few minutes, was clearing rapidly.

"Aw right!" answered Shorty. "I'll take th' string an' beat it outa here."

"No, you won't; not yet!" said Ghent, and he held the other with narrowed eyes. "You've got to promise to tie the man who falls on his horse, and take him to Mesa Grande. Understand?"

"Aw right," replied Shorty. "I'll do that."

"And mind you keep your mouth shut about everything, too, or . . ." And Ghent made a sign across his throat with his forefinger; a sign that carried a world of meaning to Shorty, who quickly nodded complete under-

standing and agreement with Ghent's plan, and with a final covetous glance at Ruth, who still stood transfixed against the wall, slowly passed out through the door.

Close behind him came Ghent, who, speaking over his shoulder to Dutch, said: "Outside."

Dutch, surprised, looked up from the task of twirling the cylinder of his gun and said: "What fer?"

"Outside!" repeated Ghent, and there was no mistaking the tone. Dutch had heard it once before in a saloon where the bully of a mining camp had attempted to "ride" Ghent when the latter had interfered with his pastime of giving hot pennies to a blind man. Dutch remembered too what had happened to the bully, and how he looked for days afterwards. Therefore, although he held a gun in his hand, and Ghent's was still in his belt, he meekly started for the door. But he could not resist the impulse to speak to Ruth, and as he passed her he smirkingly said: "Don't yuh worry 'bout me, li'l gal. I'll be right back!"

"Cut that out, Dutch!" snapped Ghent, "and get outside."

“What’s eatin’ yuh? She ain’t yourn yet, an’ she ain’t goin’ tuh be!” snarled Dutch as he passed through the door.

Once on the veranda, Dutch ran true to form. The yellow streak in him came to the surface and he quickly dodged into a shadow where he stood with gun lifted, ready to shoot the minute Ghent appeared in the doorway. Shorty saw him and dashed for his own horse and Ghent’s to prepare to fulfil his bargain, and carry the wounded or dead man to Mesa Grande. In view of Dutch’s position, Shorty had not the slightest doubt who the victim would be.

As Ghent started to follow Dutch, a feeling of alarm came over Ruth. In her terror, she had seized any possible means of saving herself from a fate, the horror of which she could not even now fully comprehend.

What was there about this stranger that had inspired her to appeal to him? He was drunk, at least when he entered the room: he was companion to these other beasts who would have made her body the stakes of a game, who would have thrown dice for her honor. She had asked him—nay, she had begged him to take her and he had bought off one of the contenders—paid

for her with gold, like— And she had trusted him—

Then, as Ghent reached the door and turned to look at her, she remembered. It had been two against one. He had disposed of one beast and now he was going to kill the other. She looked at him, as he stood in the doorway regarding her. Then his mouth—it was a good mouth she thought even in her distress—broke in a little smile and his eyes—they were a sort of powder blue, weren't they, like the old Wedgwood dinner set back at Milford Corners?—twinkled a little, as much as to say: "Don't worry, this is going to be fun!" Fun!—What if the beast should kill him? What then would happen to her? Oh, no! That must not be! And she smiled a little as she looked at him, although it was a frightened smile.

He nodded, reassuringly—and went out.

Bang!—Bang!—Bang!—Bang!—Four shots! Then silence.

Ruth stood transfixed. What was it? Oh, yes! He had killed the beast!— But now he would be coming back to claim her! She had given her word to him, this man who had come

from nowhere out of the desert night and who would take her with him back into the night! Oh, the thought of it—the shame of it! But, why didn't he come? Had the beast killed him? Oh, no! Not that! Anything but that!

Maybe they both were dead! Then she wouldn't have to go with him! She would be free again! There was the other beast, but she must dispose of him! She would kill him! She had killed a rattlesnake once—out by the corral! Yes, she would kill the other beast! It was not wrong to kill beasts!

But why was he killed? He had a good mouth and his speech had been gentle! He was big and strong and he had looked right into her very soul that time as he went through the door to——

CHAPTER XI

FOR what seemed an eternity, Ruth stood in the corner where Ghent had left her, unable to move, unable to think connectedly.

She was recalled to her senses by the rasping of the latch on the door leading to the porch—a sound as if some one were trying to turn the knob while leaning heavily against the door.

Ah, the other beast!—— When the lion falls, the jackals——! Well, she must kill the jackal! And she moved from her corner to the fireplace over which hung the loaded thirty-thirty and the revolver.

At that moment, the door swung open and she turned to behold Dutch standing in the doorway, supporting himself against the frame, swaying a little, but leering at her, one eye half-closed and his lower lip sagged almost to his chin.

“Tol’ yuh I’d be back, li’l gal, didn’ I?” he said, in a strange, thick voice. “Never dis’point ladies, tha’s me!” And he moved slowly and with evident effort toward the

startled girl, the last person she had expected to see.

"Guess I'll take wha's mine, now," Dutch went on, as he took another step toward Ruth, arms outstretched to grasp her.

Suddenly his face twisted in agony and a startled look came into his eyes. He swayed far over, then straightened with an effort and again moved a step toward the girl, then stopped.

"Don't jus' seem t' be able t' make . . ."

he began.

Then he crashed forward on his face, with a gurgling sound in his throat, twitched once or twice and lay still.

Ruth screamed, both hands clutching her throat, as she stared down at the heap on the floor.

A sound drew her attention to the doorway. There stood Ghent, composed, his mouth set in a straight line, his automatic still in his hand.

Motioning over his shoulder to Shorty, who was visible through the open door, Ghent, pointing down at Dutch, said crisply: "Take him away, Shorty, and remember your bargain . . . keep your mouth shut!"

Then he entered the room and laid his pistol on the table, turning to watch Shorty, who grasped Dutch under the arms and half carried, half dragged him from the room, across the porch and into the yard, where the horses stood patiently waiting. Shorty had remedied his former mistake and had exchanged Ghent's mount for the one that Dutch had ridden.

Hoisting Dutch across the saddle, Shorty roped him in place and, fastening a rein of Dutch's horse to his own saddle, he mounted and started for the trail to Mesa Grande without a word.

Save for his instructions to Shorty, Ghent had not uttered a word, nor had he looked at Ruth, who had scarcely taken her eyes off him since he appeared in the doorway.

Now, as they stood facing each other, the big table between them, Ghent looked at her without speaking, a deliberate, searching gaze that she was for some reason unable to meet. She could feel a flush mounting to the very roots of her hair, as she stood there, holding her dressing gown together at the throat, and, more to break the silence than to satisfy a curiosity she really did not feel, she asked, in a low voice:

“Is he dead?”

“No,” replied Ghent, shortly. “But he will be laid up for some time.”

Ruth felt a certain relief that she had not been the cause of a man’s death, but over all was the embarrassment and uncertainty of the present situation.

Although she had no means of knowing it, the first shot from Dutch’s revolver had plowed into the fleshy part of Ghent’s forearm and the wound, although not at all serious, was giving him considerable pain. He sat down, therefore, and, remembering the flask of whisky he had been holding for an emergency, reached inside his shirt and, bringing it out, drew out the cork with his teeth. As he was about to take a drink, however, Ruth exclaimed:

“Don’t!”

Ghent stopped, surprised, and, setting the flask on the table, beside his pistol, replaced the cork.

“Is this on the square?” he asked again, rising as if to await her reply.

Ruth looked straight at him and answered:

“I gave you my promise! I always keep my word!”

There was a tinge of disbelief in the quick smile Ghent gave her. Then he turned and walked to the pottery water jar hanging beside the window. Taking the gourd dipper, he filled it and drank slowly, his back toward Ruth.

She had followed him with her eyes and for a moment gazed rather fascinatedly at his broad back and powerful shoulders. Then her attention was attracted to the table where Ghent's pistol lay beside the untasted flask.

Almost without thought, she snatched up the gun and aimed it at Ghent, who turned from the water jar to find himself covered by his own weapon.

He advanced slowly toward the table, his arms outstretched. Stopping as the muzzle of the pistol rested against his chest, he said:

"Why don't you shoot?"

Then, with a whimsical smile, he continued:

"You promised, on the square! But there's nothing square about this deal. You have your chance now. I left the pistol there purposely. You ought to shoot me as you would a rattlesnake."

He stood still, looking at her with the same whimsical smile, arms still outstretched, but apparently without fear.

"Why don't you shoot?" he asked. "You ought to."

He spoke in a tone that seemed to come from the depths of his soul. He looked into the face of the girl and saw etched there the reflection of the terror through which she had passed and he was ashamed.

"You ought to," he repeated.

"I know that," Ruth replied, quietly.

"Then, why don't you?" he asked.

Ruth continued to gaze at him. The pistol wavered in her grasp and she put it down on the table.

"I don't know," she said slowly, almost in a whisper.

"I believe you have nerve enough for that—or anything," said Ghent. "Answer me! Why don't you shoot?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . . I don't know. . . . You laid it there before me and I . . ." Then with a flash of spirit, she said: "You have no right to die . . . now."

"How is that?" asked Ghent, puzzled.

Ruth hesitated. "You must live—to pay for having spoiled your life," she answered.

"Do you think it is spoiled?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," replied Ruth, and Ghent winced.

"How about your life?" he countered.

"I thought of taking my own life when you laid that pistol down there so close to me." Ghent started.

"I have a right to die," she went on, "but I cannot. . . ." She became almost hysterical. "I cannot. . . . I love my life; I want to live. . . . In torment, in darkness, perhaps. . . . It doesn't matter. . . . But I want my life. I will have it!"

Weakly she pushed the weapon across the table toward Ghent who placed it in his belt. Then she said:

"I made a bargain with you. You know how and why I made it. If you want me on those conditions, take me, and may God forgive you for it. But if there is the least semblance of a soul in you to be judged, don't let me do myself violence. Keep that pistol away from me." Then sinking down into a chair beside the table she cried into her hands, "O God, have pity on me!"

Ghent, speechless from her outburst, stood silent for a moment looking down at her compassionately. Then he spoke in a low voice, slowly at first but with growing intensity:

"I've lived a hard and careless life," he said. "There seemed to me to be an excuse for it. I have been going down hill pretty fast. But"—and he hesitated for a second, then continued—"but I haven't gone so far that I cannot tell one kind of woman from another." Ruth looked up quickly, hope dawning in her eyes. Ghent went on:

"If that was all of it, I'd be miles away from here by now, riding like hell for liquor to wash the taste of shame from my mouth. But that isn't all. I've found here what I've been looking the world over for, and never knew it."

There was a tender light in his eyes as he leaned over her and said:

"Tell me your promise holds, and I'll go away now."

"Oh, yes, go, go!" she replied eagerly. "You will be merciful. You will not hold me to my promise." And her eyes, wet with tears, gazed into his; pleading, sorrowful eyes that

awakened within Ghent the full realization of the position in which the girl had placed herself.

"You will go, now?" Ruth continued, entreaty in her voice. "Say you will!"

"And when I come back, what then?" asked Ghent, taking a step nearer. As she did not reply at once he repeated his question, slowly, deliberately: "And when I come back, what then?" He was watching the girl intently, waiting for her answer.

Ruth looked up slowly. For a full minute she gazed, and in that time Ghent lived a year. He was afraid to breathe for fear of missing the words he knew were forming in her mind. Then she spoke, and Ghent heard:

"You never—could—come back."

His heart chilled, and he replied almost mechanically, without actually knowing he was speaking: "No. If I went, I never could come back."

"You will go?" Ruth asked quickly, seeing in his abstraction a mood that might release her.

"You want me to go for good?" asked Ghent, bringing his mind back to the subject in hand.

"Yes," was Ruth's emphatic reply.

"Do you mean that?" he asked, a look of pain crossing his face.

"Yes, ten thousand times!" she replied wildly, almost hysterically. Then as he did not speak she continued: "Oh, why did you come here to-night!"

"I'll answer that," he replied curtly. "I came because I was blind, crazy drunk, and looking for damnation the nearest way. That's why I came." Then he stopped for a moment. "But that's not why I am staying," he went on almost tenderly.

"I am talking to you in my right mind now," he continued, holding up his hand to restrain her. "I want you to try and see this thing the way it is."

"Oh, that is what I want *you* to do!" interrupted Ruth. "You did yourself and me a hideous wrong by coming here to-night. Don't do us both a still greater wrong. I was in a panic of fear and I snatched at the first thing I could. Think what our life would be, beginning as we have begun! Oh, in God's pity, go away now and never come back! Don't you see there could never be anything between us

but hatred and misery, and loathing and horror?"

Weakly she finished her speech and sat with her arms outstretched toward Ghent as if in supplication.

Quietly he sat, deep in thought, and as Ruth studied his face she saw the jaws tighten and the veins stand out on his forehead; there was a grim look to the jaws. He stood up and pointed toward her bedroom.

"Get your things!" he said sharply. "We'll see about all this later. Hurry!"

Breathless, utterly amazed, Ruth gazed at him bewilderingly until he said in the same sharp tone:

"Remember your promise! You said you always kept your word!"

Meekly, without a word, she turned from him and, with a pitiful, appealing glance over her shoulder, went into her bedroom.

Once she had gone, Ghent gave his attention to his injured arm. It was merely a flesh wound, but he had been able only to bandage it loosely with a handkerchief. He would have need of both arms to-night. He went quickly to the water-jar and, filling a basin with water,

bathed and rebandaged the wound as well as he could with one hand and his teeth.

It was hasty treatment, but Ghent did not wish to alarm the girl so that by the time she returned from her room dressed for departure and carrying a traveling bag, he had completed the rude dressing.

The quick eye of the girl, however, discovered traces of blood that had trickled out from beneath Ghent's crudely made bandage, and with a little cry of alarm she hurried to him, saying: "Oh, you are wounded!"

"It is nothing," he answered.

"It is a wound and I shall dress it," she replied with emphasis, and before he could protest she had hurried across the room, and from an emergency case produced a roll of bandages, several pads of gauze, and a bottle of iodine.

Deftly she cleansed the wound and applied the iodine which burned as it ran into the torn flesh, bringing a frown of pain to Ghent's face. As she bent to wind the bandage, her head was very close to Ghent's, so close that stray wisps of her glorious hair, escaping from under her hat, brushed his cheek.

The earnest face with the deep blue eyes, unshed tears showing in them, touched Ghent, and he almost weakened in his determination to take her away. His voice was tender as he asked: "Why do you do this for me?"

"It is nothing at all," she replied. "I would cheerfully do the same thing for a dog."

"Yes, I dare say you would," he answered, gazing at her. "But the point is, I am not a dog. I'm just human—the worst way."

He longed to take her in his arms and tell her that he loved her; that for her he would do many things, big things; that once he had glimpsed her through the window that night, he knew that he had found the one woman for whom he had been searching, without really realizing what it was he was searching for. He knew, however, that she would not believe him. He realized that in holding her to her promise he was acting like a cad, but he had to go through with it, for the thought of losing her was more than he believed he could stand.

He felt that by taking her away and caring for her, and showing her what she meant to him, he could finally bring to the surface the

love he felt in his innermost soul she had for him.

With the wound bound up neatly there was little else to do before departing, and they both instinctively started for the door, when Ghent suddenly asked: "Who are you ranching here with?"

"With my brother," answered Ruth. "He has taken his wife to the railroad station."

"Better leave a note for him then," and Ghent indicated with a nod of his head toward the desk at one side of the room.

Obediently she crossed to the desk and, seating herself, wrote briefly, with Ghent looking over her shoulder:

DEAR PHILIP:

I have gone away to be married.

RUTH.

As she signed her name the pen wavered and finally fell from her nerveless fingers, as she finished the scrawl that was wholly unlike the firm handwriting that was characteristic of her.

Ghent had already picked up the small trav-

eling bag, and as Ruth arose from the desk he led the way toward the door and, opening it, stepped onto the veranda. For a moment Ruth stopped as she was about to cross the threshold and turned to take a long look of farewell at the cozy room in which she had passed so many happy hours.

Around the room went her tear-dimmed eyes, and as she finally turned to go her gaze rested for an instant on the little bunch of desert flowers on the floor, now, where they had been dropped by Dutch.

The gorgeous red blooms were wilted now and almost ground into the Navajo rug, and Ruth, as she slowly closed the door, saw the imprint of a hobnailed heel outlined in a deeper red on the petals, where the lives of the blossoms had been cruelly crushed.

CHAPTER XII

“I’LL take that there pot, m’self, ’f yuh don’t mind, Ike. I had a cuppla aces back tuh back th’ hull time.” And the long fingers of Mr. Pink-Eye Tappan, leading citizen of the thriving mining town of San Jacinto, reached for the money lying on the center of the round table.

Ike, otherwise and officially the Honorable Ike Knowles, justice of the peace, notary public, real estate agent whenever the opportunity offered, and general dispenser of legal knowledge in San Jacinto, hastily withdrew his own eager hand as Pink-Eye turned over his hole card and displayed the “cuppla aces” that had won the pot for him.

In addition to Pink-Eye and the Judge, three others were present in the back room of the Judge’s house, two of them in the game and one in the capacity of spectator. This last was Abner Rattner, a nondescript little man who always attended the Judge’s stud poker sessions but never played. He had a weak heart,

it was said, and an affection for the coin of the realm greater than a mother's love for her first-born. Consequently he was constitutionally debarred from participation in games of chance. Even the thought of risking a nickel on the turn of a card gave Abner a nervous shock.

The other two players were Joe Prescott and Harley Lukes, prospectors, and, when luck favored them, miners in a small way. It was a congenial party and a bottle partly filled with whisky that stood at the edge of the table, had added a note of conviviality.

In spite of this, the Judge thought it wise to remark the success of Pink-Eye, who had won several good-sized pots in course of the evening, therefore:

"Cert'ny does beat hell how Pink-Eye gits them there aces, don't it?" the Judge observed. "That's 'bout a dozen times t'night he's had 'em back tuh back."

"Jest speakin' gen'ral, wan't yuh, Jedge? Nothin' pus'nal in that remark," suggested Pink-Eye, reaching toward his hip pocket.

Observing the motion, the Judge promptly disavowed any personal application of his hastily spoken words.

“Waal, I was jest awonderin’,” concluded Pink-Eye, drawing from his pocket a huge bandanna handkerchief with which he proceeded to mop his brow, at the same time pouring himself a drink with the other hand.

Joe Prescott had started a new deal, so Pink-Eye set his glass of liquor on the table, convenient to his drinking arm, and gave his attention to the game. His hole card was again an ace and he nonchalantly tossed a thin dime into the center of the table.

The sight of such careless handling of money had a disturbing effect on Abner Rattner, who sat at Pink-Eye’s right. True, the money was not his, but it was money just the same and Abner abhorred carelessness with money. Pink-Eye’s recently poured drink was right in front of him and, in the stress of the moment, Abner, almost but not quite without thought, picked up the glass and drank the liquor at one gulp. Pink-Eye’s next card was a deuce and the third was a queen. Pink-Eye was disturbed. Was it possible his luck was turning? He choked a little and choking made him dry. Therefore, without taking his eyes from the

dealer, he raised his glass to his lips and took a long swallow of—nothing. Turning a cold eye on Abner, who squirmed slightly, he inquired gently:

“What ’n ’ell happened tuh my drink, Abner?”

“How sh’d I know?” queried Abner.

“Waal, somep’n happened to her, an’ you’re th’ nearest, so I sorter reckoned yuh might know somep’n ’bout it.”

“Might’ve ’vaporated,” suggested Abner, not wishing to be left under a cloud of suspicion. “I was readin’ somep’n t’other day ’bout how th’ air o’ Arizony’s so dry that water will ’vaporate if it’s left out some’rs.”

“Didn’t say nothin’ ’bout likker ’vaporatin’, did it, Abner?” inquired Pink-Eye.

“No,” replied Abner. “But it’s all wet, ain’t it? It could work jest th’ same’s water in the dryness.”

“Mebbe,” agreed Pink-Eye. “But I’m bettin’ it was somep’n a damn sight dryer ’n th’ air o’ Arizony that ’vaporated my drink.” With which remark he poured himself another and, with another cold glance at Abner, set it

down by his left hand, observing: "I'll see if this side o' Arizony's any damper 'n t'other side."

"Are you birds intendin' tuh spend th' evenin' debatin' th' merits o' wet an' dry air, or are yuh goin' tuh play poker?" inquired Joe Prescott, the dealer.

"That's what I'd like tuh know," remarked the Judge. "Yuh know, ther's somep'n in the statootes, an' Blackstone hisself comments on it, regardin' th' inadvisability o' interdoocin' irrelevant matter inter a case, an' such I regard this here discussion tuh be. . . ."

"Fer Gawd's sake, shut up, will yuh?" interjected Harley Lukes. "Wher' 'n 'ell d'yuh think yuh are, in th' Soopreme Court 'r somep'n? Damn it, I almost fergot my hole card! 'F yer goin' tuh play poker, do it an' stop gassin'."

His Honor, jolted out of his temporary lapse into judicial deportment, wiped his nose nervously with the back of his hand and said: "Continue, continue! Go on, Joe, deal 'em!"

"I won't take that card," hastily remarked Pink-Eye, who sat next to Joe. "Yuh been wavin' that damn trey o' hearts in th' air like

a flag ever since th' Judge started tuh address th' jury; ever'boday in the room, and prob'ly in Arizony hereabouts has seen it an' I don't want it."

"What's the difference?" asked Joe. "It goes face up in yer hand anyhow, don't it?"

"Allowin' you're right, I don't want it, an' I won't have it. I stands on muh constitutional rights, and demands 'nother card. Put that one on the bottom of th' deck," commanded Pink-Eye.

Joe placed the offending trey of hearts on the bottom of the pack, and threw Pink-Eye a new card—another queen, which gave him a visible pair. Pink-Eye kept his eyes on his cards, and waited for the storm to break. He felt that such an opening would bring a torrent of abuse and he was not mistaken.

"Looks like th' witness has been tampered with," remarked the Judge.

"Tampered with, hell!" exploded Harley Lukes. "Fixed, if yuh ask me." And he turned his hand down in disgust.

"Nobody asked yuh," retorted Joe Prescott, not liking the evident reflection on his dealing. "Didn't expect yuh tuh stay nohow. Yuh never

do, 'nless yuh got everythin' in th' deck in yer hand."

"Is that so!" came back Harley. "Well, I stays as often as you do; you ain't such a plugin' fool yerself."

"My, ain't we havin' a nice time!" interjected Abner, with all the biting sarcasm he could command. "Next time I come over, I'll bring my knittin', and we can . . ."

But he was cut short by Joe Prescott who suddenly shot at him: "Well, it'll be a welcome sight tuh see yuh bring somep'n over. Yuh us'ally come empty handed an' go away loaded."

Further talk along this line was stopped by Pink-Eye who held up his hand for silence. Then, as he got it, he slowly took a drink, after which he cleared his throat, wiped his lips on the big bandanna, and said:

"Gentlemen, an' as th' Jedge would say, I use the term advisedly, since ther' has been a question raised as to the regards of the manner of which I got th' right an' title to this here pair of queens here, I perpose here an' now, bein' in my right mind, to declare this here hand o' mine deader'n that there moon-

faced heifer o' Abner's that fell offen the cliff over tuh Scragg's Buttes." Then drawing himself to his full height, he continued with dignity: "Now, then, gentlemen, and again I use that there word advisedly, fight it out amongst yerselves. Me, I'm done!" And Pink-Eye pushed his chair back to become for the time being a spectator.

"Well, in that case, then," said Harley, "I'll jest take back my cards and sit still. C'mon, Joe, deal 'em!"

"Right away," answered Joe, as he threw out the remaining cards of the round.

Pink-Eye watched the deal patronizingly, and sneered as the Judge went in for a dime as a pair of nines showed in his hand.

"Plungin', ain't ye?" he jeered. "A hull dime on a pair o' nines which beats anythin' possible on the board right now. Why didn't yuh go fer fifteen cents an' be a real honest-tuh-Gawd sport?"

"I'm a playin' this here hand, if yuh don't mind," remarked the Judge icily. "Deal 'em, Joe; ever'body's in, though it's most surprisin' to see Harley comin' along with nothin' but a wild-lookin' straight possible."

"I'm a playing this here hand, if yuh don't mind," replied Harley, with a perfect imitation of the Judge's nasal tones.

"Waal, c'mon, Jedge," he continued, "it's your say so; you got the big hand—that is in plain sight." And Harley jingled a handful of nickles and dimes over the table.

"It'll cost yuh twenta cent t'see what I got," snapped the Judge.

"'S a bargain, Jedge," calmly replied Harley, as he threw in forty cents, saying, "there's your twenta and twenta more. Now it'll cost yuh twenta cent to see what I've got." And once again he perfectly imitated the Judge's manner of speaking.

The Judge scratched his chin and wiped his nose with the back of his hand as he looked intently at Harley. Abner, roused to a high pitch of excitement by the sight of all the money on the table, even though none of it was his, leaned forward, perspiration starting on his forehead.

"Waal," began the Judge, but he got no further, being interrupted by a loud knocking on the front door.

"Who'n hell can that be 't this here time o' night?" asked Pink-Eye.

"Mebbe 't's the law," suggested Abner, but he was promptly squelched by the Judge, who snapped: "Don't try tuh git funny, Abner. Yuh know 's well 's any man here that I represent all th' law, past, present and future the' is hereabouts, in addition tuh bein' a commissioner of . . ."

"Good Lord, Jedge!" interrupted Harley. "Don't, for Heaven's sake, give us a list o' yer titles! Go find out who's at the door, and le's finish this here hand."

The knocking was repeated.

"Whoever 'tis, they're certainly goin' t' git in, ain't they?" remarked Abner.

"Not if they wait fer me t' open the door. I wouldn't leave this here hand o' mine if 'twas the president o' the United States hisself," retorted the Judge. "Pink-Eye," he continued, "go see who 'tis, and tell 'em I said I ain't in."

Pink-Eye arose reluctantly and went from the room in the direction of the front door.

The Judge sat contemplating Harley's hand.

There were a three-spot, a four, a five, and a six visible. His hole card might be a deuce or a seven, either of which would give him a straight. On the other hand, he might just be making a bluff. Running the possibilities over in his mind, the Judge took stock of the other hands on the board. Looking at Joe Prescott, he asked: "Are you in this, Joe?"

"Do I look's dumb's that?" Joe inquired. "You sittin' with two nines in plain sight, and Harley here with a possible straight, or he wouldn't a' plunged like he did."

"Waal, I jest wanted t' know, that's all," replied the Judge. "It's customary fer a player t' turn his hand over when he's outta of the game." And he reached over and turned Joe's hand face down.

"Thanks, Mr. Hoyle!" was Joe's remark, as he shuffled his hand in with the rest of the deck lying on the table.

"I'll call yuh!" snapped the Judge, like a man suddenly making up his mind to do a hazardous thing, and he threw in the extra twenty cents.

Just as he did so, Pink-Eye hurried in and

leaning over the Judge whispered something in his ear.

“Git out o’ here, I can’t be bothered! I told yuh t’ tell ’em I was out,” said the Judge, removing Pink-Eye’s hand from his lapel.

Shaking him by the shoulder, Pink-Eye again whispered in his ear.

“Whassat?” said the Judge, blinking up at Pink-Eye.

“I said,” replied Pink-Eye, “that ther’s a couple out here what wants t’ get married now.” He leaned closer so that all could hear and continued: “An’, boys, the gal sure is a pippin. I’d marry her m’self, right now.”

At these words the Judge arose from the table, scooped up the pot and stuck it in his vest pocket. Then he proceeded to slick down the wild locks of gray hair that framed the sides of his otherwise bald head.

“A fine time fer decent people t’ pick t’ git married,” sneered Abner.

“Have some respect fer the law an’ the holy bonds o’ matermony, Abner,” remarked the Judge, as he strode from the room, followed by the others, Abner bringing up the rear.

In the bare front room of the Judge's home, Ruth Jordan and Stephen Ghent waited for the man who had the legal authority to marry them. They stood apart, Ruth gazing at nothing, Ghent gazing at her.

Footsteps sounded along the passageway, and then Judge Knowles walked into the room with all the dignity he could command. He bowed low, and after one glance at Ruth, mentally endorsed without qualification everything Pink-Eye had said about her.

"Yuh want t' git married, do yuh?" asked the Judge, rubbing his hands together.

"Yes," replied Ghent, without looking at Ruth.

"Kindly stand over here, then," continued the Judge in an official tone, indicating places on either side of him before the small table which stood under a hanging lamp, which shed a pale yellow light over the group.

Turning to the four men in the doorway, the Judge said: "You gentlemen will witness this here ceremony as required by the laws of this here sov'reign State of Arizony."

Solemnly the men filed in as Ruth and Ghent took their places, and at once the Judge

plunged into the brief civil marriage ceremony. It was over in a few minutes, but throughout the nasal, sing-song reading of the terse matter-of-fact phrases, Ruth lived a thousand years.

More than once she was on the point of screaming out that it was a sham, a mockery, that she had given herself to this man to save herself from a worse fate. But before her appeared those grim, tight-lipped portraits that hung in the living room back in Milford Corners—paintings of all the Jordans long since gone to their rewards, just or otherwise, and they seemed to shout at her: “You gave a Jordan’s promise! Now keep it!” And she remained silent. Mechanically she answered the questions put to her by the Judge, and when he asked: “Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?” she almost faltered, but with an effort, answered almost inaudibly, “I do,” at the same time nodding her head slowly.

When the Judge asked Ghent: “Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?” Ruth could not help but note the deep, vibrant voice as he replied firmly and earnestly, “I

do!" And in that reply was all the sincerity of his whole nature; into it he threw all the devotion and love he felt, and his eyes sought Ruth's, but she avoided his gaze.

That was all. They were married now. She belonged to him and she loathed herself and him. She hated this scrawny unkempt person who possessed the legal power to bind her to this strange man, and a life, long or short, whichever it might be, of untold misery.

"Jest step up an' sign the book, please," said the Judge, peering over his spectacles at Ruth, and as she came to the table he placed a pen in her hand and indicated the line with a bony finger.

She signed without seeing or caring, but it was enough to satisfy the Judge. He took the pen from her and passed it to Ghent, who signed his name to the record boldly and with a certain air of pride.

"I congratulate yuh both," were the words Ruth heard, as she turned in time to see Ghent handing a roll of money to the Judge.

"Must it always be a money consideration?" she asked herself, as she turned her back on the others in the room and looked out of the

window into the darkness. "First he bought me with a chain of nuggets; now he must even pay this man for legally strengthening his hold on me."

Pink-Eye stepped up, signed the book as one of the witnesses, as did Joe Prescott, after which the former started across the room for Ruth, wiping his mouth with the big bandanna handkerchief, saying as he did so: "Well, I reckon we gotta kiss the bride." But Ghent reached out and with steely fingers gripped him by the arm.

"Never mind that!" he said. He went to Ruth, took her gently by the arm, and started to lead her away.

Pink-Eye suddenly dashed out of the room, and before the rest of the party were able to reach the front door he hastily returned with a large paper bag in his hand.

Ghent led Ruth slowly out on the porch of the Judge's house and helped her into the saddle. She was in a daze, and did not care what might happen. It seemed to her that the end of everything had come—the end, at any rate, of everything that she considered worth while.

"Hope yuh have a good trip!" Abner called after them.

Ghent waved a hand in acknowledgment; Ruth shuddered.

Then, as Ghent mounted his horse, Pink-Eye threw a big handful of rice over the newly wedded pair, following it with another which he took from the bag he held in his hand. The idea instantly appealed to the others and they crowded around Pink-Eye, grabbed handfuls of the rice and threw it after Ruth and Ghent who had started to ride off into the night.

Down the steps of the porch, Pink-Eye and the others ran and continued to shower the pair until all of the rice was gone and Ruth and Ghent had passed into the shadows down the narrow, dusty street.

Turning from a last look after the couple, the Judge leveled a bony finger at Pink-Eye and asked: "Where d'yuh git that there rice yuh was throwin' around so free an' careless like?"

"Found it 'longside the clock in yer kitchen," was the laconic reply.

"Oh, yuh did, did yuh?" barked the Judge. "Waal, if I ain't too curious, who 'n 'ell

invited yuh tuh git so much to home aroun' my place, doggone yuh? Ther' was 'nough rice in that there bag tuh make me more'n fifty puddin's, an' yuh know how much I like rice puddin', an' there's the hull of 'em splattered all over creation."

And as the door banged shut after the Judge and his companions on their way to resume their interrupted stud game, his high-pitched voice could still be heard raised in complaint over the unauthorized waste of his good rice.

CHAPTER XIII

“You must be tired! We’ll camp here and I’ll make some coffee for you,” said Ghent, riding up beside Ruth as they reached a shaded spot high up in the mountains, a good two-hours’ ride out of San Jacinto. Since they left the town, Ruth had been riding ahead followed by Ghent, leading the pack-mule he had secured before they went to the Judge’s house. After he had pointed out the trail, neither had spoken until Ghent had called a halt.

Ruth had been in a daze ever since the weird marriage ceremony. The occurrences of the age-long night seemed to her like a dream—a nightmare from which she shortly would awake to find herself safe in bed in her own room at the ranch. Ghent’s words, however, recalled her to the present with a shock as she realized that what had taken place was not, after all, a dream, but stern reality.

Meekly she brought her horse to a stop and looked at Ghent, who was regarding her with



A Metro-Goldwyn Picture.

“YOU’VE GOT TO TAKE THE MAN THAT’S HIT TO MESA GRANDE—AND KEEP HIM THERE!”

The Great Divide.

an expression of tenderness and contrition. Ruth did not notice this, however. She could only see the horror of it all. And now he had called a halt and in her innermost being she felt that here in this lonely spot, high above the world, tucked into the giant hills that she loved, would be demanded of her the consummation of that pitiable mockery of a marriage, and she shuddered.

"Please let me help you," said Ghent, as she prepared to dismount. She said nothing and he gently took her arm and helped her to the ground.

"Just sit there and rest; I'll have the coffee boiling, and the tent up in a jiffy." And Ghent smiled as he spoke, trying to inject into the situation a little cheer which he was far from feeling himself.

Ruth obeyed without a word, seating herself on a flat rock and gazing off into the night. Ghent's quick movements as he set about building a fire which he soon had burning merrily, finally attracted her attention and she could not help but admire the quiet efficient manner in which this big man went about his self-appointed task.

Once as he was taking the heavy pack from the back of the mule, he allowed too much weight to fall on his injured arm, and an involuntary exclamation of pain was wrung from his lips. He inwardly cursed himself for his weakness, but Ruth heard and went at once to his assistance, helping him to lower the heavy box to the ground.

"Thank you, so much," he said, smiling pleasantly. "I forgot about that scratch."

She did not answer, but merely turned and walked off toward a big ledge of rock a few feet away. Stepping to the very edge of the huge flat rock she looked down. There, hundreds of feet below, in the canyon, ran a silvery thread, gleaming in the moonlight, which she knew was the North Fork, a river which she and Win had forded many times farther up its course on their rides about the country.

The thought of Win recalled to her mind Philip and Polly and her mother. A feeling of shame came over her, and she wanted to hurl herself into that deep chasm below to atone for the wrong she had done them all.

Closer to the edge of the flat rock she crept, and then drew back in horror at the thought

of self-destruction. She loved life and besides all her teachings cried out at the taking of life, even one's own.

As she stood looking down at the thin silvery ribbon of the river, Ghent, in the midst of setting up the tent, stopped and watched her closely. Observing the tense figure, bending ever so slightly to peer into the depths below, he sensed what was passing through her mind, and it was with a feeling of great relief that he saw her turn and walk slowly back to the flat rock on which she had been sitting.

Slowly she resumed her seat, her shoulders sagging, her head drooping and tears in her eyes; a pitiful picture, and one that caused a choking sensation in Ghent's throat. Seeking to ease the strain of the situation, he hurried over to her, with the tent still only partly pitched, and handed her a biscuit from a freshly opened package. She took it mechanically. Ghent stood beside her a moment and then said: "Oh, I almost forgot about the coffee. I'll make it now."

Ruth turned and looked at him for a moment, then shook her head negatively. Ghent shrugged his shoulders and went back to the

task of erecting the tent. Again he left this work and, going to a spring which bubbled out of the rock, brought Ruth a tin cup full of water. She took it and thanked him quietly and he returned to the tent.

Finally, and to Ruth's dismay, the tent was pegged into place, and she saw Ghent inside on his knees making a bed of blankets.

Involuntarily she stood up as if to protest, then as suddenly sank back to her seat. What good would it do to protest? She had made a bargain, a bad one, true, but she would have to go through with her part of it. She tried to steel herself for the ordeal she felt was coming.

The bed made, Ghent turned and looked at her, and she cringed. There swept over her a feeling of revulsion that almost nauseated her. Like a frightened animal at bay, the girl glanced quickly about as if to seek a place of refuge, but there was none. So she sat and waited while Ghent came slowly toward her.

Standing in front of her, he said, and his voice contained a note of tenderness that she had not noticed before: "Come, your bed is ready, you must be very tired." And he held

out his hand which she ignored, as she arose from the rock and started with slow, faltering steps towards the tent.

Ghent stood and looked after the forlorn figure, so pathetic, so alone; in his heart there were pity and regret. A lump rose in his throat, and he brushed the back of his hand across his eyes.

The girl had almost reached the tent when he called softly: "Please! just one moment."

Ruth stopped and turned toward him. In her frightened eyes, Ghent saw, even at that distance, a look that stabbed him to the heart with remorse.

For a full moment he gazed at her, conflicting thoughts tearing at his senses. Should he take her back and go his way, leaving her free. No, no! He wanted her! He could make her love him in time, even if she hated him at this moment. No, he could not take her back. Even if he did, wouldn't this experience be with her forever? Could she forget, and go on living her life as though this night had never been? He knew she could not. He knew also that he could never take up his own life again as he had lived it before this wonderful woman had

come into it. No, they must go on—what was it that rowdy old judge had said?—oh, yes!—for better or worse.

Fear turned Ruth's heart to ice as she stood gazing at Ghent, waiting for him to speak. The thought of what he might say, and had the right—the legal right—to say, froze the blood in her veins.

When he did speak, he said, simply:

“Please tell me your name.”

The sudden relief from the tension left Ruth wholly unnerved. She felt an almost overpowering desire to shriek with laughter. She controlled herself, however, and said, even with a faint smile: “My name was Ruth Jordan.”

“Ruth Jordan!” repeated Ghent softly. Then he smiled and continued: “It is a good name—Ruth—it is a pretty name. I love it—Ruth. . . .”

Ruth did not answer, but turned and continued slowly toward the tent. What did it matter whether he did or did not like her name? As she reached the tent, she heard him call after her, rather cheerily she thought:

“My name is Ghent—Stephen Ghent.”

She turned and acknowledged this with a

little nod and then went into the tent, drawing the flaps together behind her.

Her first impulse was to throw herself down on the pile of blankets and burst into tears. She fought this down, however, telling herself that she must save her strength for the ordeal through which she felt certain she would have to go.

Back in a corner of the tent she sat, eyes watching every movement of the flaps as each little breeze shook them. Each crackle of the fire brought her up with a start, every nerve taut, every sense alert.

Once she dozed, but was awakened with a start by the sound of Ghent's footsteps approaching the tent. The flaps were parted slightly at the bottom and through this space she saw, reflected by the light of the fire, the shadow of Ghent standing, face toward the tent. She tried to cry out, but terror had closed her throat and she sat silent—waiting.

Then the shadow stooped and picked up something from the ground. Then it moved away toward the fire and there was the sound of a fresh log being thrown on the blaze. For a time she heard the scraping of Ghent's boots

against the rock, as he moved about the little camp. Then all was still save for the crackling of the fire.

Ruth crept to the tent-flaps and looked out. Ghent, wrapped in his blanket, was lying beside the fire, apparently asleep.

Breathing a prayer of thanksgiving for this respite, short though she knew it would be, Ruth crept back to the blanket couch Ghent had prepared for her and, worn out by the events of this terrible night, soon fell into a sleep of utter exhaustion.

CHAPTER XIV

RUTH awoke with a start as a ray of sunlight, filtering through an opening of the tent-flaps, shone full in her eyes. For a moment she was bewildered at finding herself, not in her own bed at the ranch, but lying on a pile of blankets in a tent. She sat up and then it all came back to her with a rush.—The attack on the ranch; her appeal to a man from nowhere to save her from a horrible fate at the hands of two other beasts in human form; her promise to go with him in return for this service; his buying off one of the beasts and shooting the other; the hasty marriage before a mining town justice of the peace with “desert rats” as witnesses and the long ride to this place in the mountains.

She recalled vividly her fears of the night before, as she had crouched in the tent waiting for this man who had taken her to come and claim what was legally his right.

That he had not done so aroused in her a feeling of intense thankfulness and she found

her heart warming a little toward this strange man who had spared her at least for the time.

On the ground inside the tent, close to her foot, was a little patch of sunlight. She knew it was morning, and she was glad at the coming of the new day, for she was afraid only in the darkness.

Outside she heard Ghent whistling merrily, and interspersed with his pleasant bird-like whistling she could hear also the cheerful crackling of flames as he built up the fire.

She ached in every muscle, both from the long ride over the rough trail and from sleeping with only a blanket between her and the hard ground. When she stood up she found that she scarcely could straighten her limbs.

Looking out through the flap of the tent she could see the fire with the coffee-pot boiling merrily. She sniffed the fragrant aroma and listened to the sizzle of frying bacon and realized that she was hungry.

Kneeling beside a little stream that rioted over the rocks, she saw Ghent mixing a pan of batter. He was whistling and keeping time to the tune with vigorous stirring of the big spoon.

Having beaten the batter to the desired consistency, he returned to the fire, and placed the large pan down on a flat rock. Then his eyes traveled toward the tent, and Ruth drew back, not wishing him to know that she had been watching him. She could still see through the narrow space between the flaps, and found herself smiling with him as he picked up a small pan and came toward the tent, beating on the pan with his knuckles and calling out cheerily:

“Breakfus am served in de dinin’ car, ma’am!”

Almost immediately she stepped from the tent and Ghent drew back in mock astonishment, saying: “Well, I’ve always heard it took the ladies a long time to get ready in the morning, but here you are, spic and span and as fresh as a daisy, and I just this moment called you.”

Throwing his head back he laughed heartily at the queer look she gave him and his laugh was good to hear, at least it reacted comfortably on Ruth and she smiled a little in return.

“Oh, yes, just a moment,” he said, “and I

will have the water prepared for your morning ablutions."

He went hastily to the little stream and scooped up the pan full of water. He was just turning to carry it back to Ruth when he discovered that he had also scooped up a frog along with the water.

"Don't suppose you want a pet reptile, guaranteed absolutely harmless, do you?" he asked laughingly, as he held up the frog by one hind leg.

Ruth again smiled as she shook her head. Somehow she did not seem able to feel bitter towards this man in spite of the fact that he had carried her off.

Emptying out the water, Ghent refilled the pan which he placed on an upturned box and motioned to Ruth that all was ready.

The water was cool and refreshing as she bathed her face in it, and in a minute or two she had completed the rather meager toilet and turned to find Ghent already busy with the pan of batter and the skillet.

Heating a small quantity of the bacon grease, Ghent poured a portion of the batter from the large pan into the skillet where it quickly took

shape and began to bubble. He turned the edge a little all around so that the cooking batter would not stick and then, when he thought it had been thoroughly browned on one side, with a quick jerk he tossed the flapjack into the air and as it came down deftly caught it in the pan on its uncooked side.

Ruth watched his efforts with interest. He recalled to her the picture of a miner, busy with his frying pan and flapjack, advertising some popular brand of flour that she had seen on billboards along the railroad. She smiled at his earnestness as he placed the finished product on a plate and went about the making of another flapjack.

Turning, Ghent caught the girl looking at him and he laughed a little, saying: "You'd better come and get these while they are good and hot." Again he flopped the half-done cake over, and in a moment had another on the plate and a third started in the skillet.

With a final pat at her hair which she had hastily arranged, Ruth went over and seated herself opposite Ghent with the flat rock between them.

Ghent reached over and grasped the handle

of the coffee pot, but quickly withdrew his hand with a sharp exclamation, for in his desire to serve the girl he had overlooked the fact that the handle was hot. Ruth smiled and, using a corner of her riding jacket as a protection, lifted the pot from the fire and poured two cups of the delicious aromatic fluid.

Ghent viewed this action with unconcealed delight, forgetting all about the cooking flapjack until an odor of scorching batter warned him that the cake was burning. He quickly tossed it into the air where it turned gracefully enough, but as it came down he missed it and instead of landing squarely in the skillet, it struck the edge and was cut in half, one part dropping on the hot coals while the other landed in a jumbled mass in the pan.

Ghent glanced quickly at Ruth, visibly embarrassed. "First one I've missed in years; can't understand how I did it," he said. Then seeing the amusement in her eyes, he laughed at his own clumsiness and Ruth laughed too in spite of herself.

Ruth was hungry, and the flapjacks and bacon were delicious. Both ate heartily and drank all the coffee.

Then there came that momentary lull, which occurs at every table after a meal. Taking advantage of the apparent friendliness of Ghent's attitude, Ruth looked squarely at him and, her hands clinched in her lap, said:

"There is something kind about you. . . . I didn't realize. . . . Won't you please take me back to my people?"

Ghent was smiling as she began to speak, but by the time she had finished, and she spoke slowly and with feeling, the smile had gone, and in its place was a grim look. Tight-lipped he gazed at her, searching her face, striving to read her very soul. Then slowly shaking his head, he replied, in a low voice:

"No—— I want you more than I ever wanted anything in this world!"

The girl's face fell; gone in an instant was the light-heartedness that had just begun to return to her, and in its place there returned the old feeling of dread.

For a time Ghent sat staring straight before him, then, turning to Ruth, he said: "A bargain is a bargain, and besides, you forget one thing." He paused, and Ruth waited expectantly for him to finish.

"We are married!" And Ghent rose from his place at the table and stood looking down at the girl whom he longed to take in his arms and comfort.

"Surely," said Ruth, her voice rising in protest, "you don't consider that grotesque mummerly last night a marriage?"

"Absolutely," answered Ghent, firmly. "Binding us both—both, understand—for better or worse, until death us do part, according to the laws of the State of Arizona. And, besides, you gave your promise to me and that in my mind is far bigger and more binding than the words of a third party at any kind of a ceremony."

As he said this he turned and extinguished the fire and began to collect the camp gear.

"We've a long ride ahead of us, Ruth. . . ." He hesitated a little over her name. "Another camp to-night and then . . . home!"

He pronounced the word quietly, lingeringly, with a note almost of awe in his voice. But this was lost on Ruth to whom the mention of the word brought a renewed feeling of dread. What could home be to her with this man, who had taken her as he did? Home!— Instead of

a haven of safety, of joy and laughter, it would be a place of horror and torment. But she merely arose and, in silence, helped Ghent in the preparations to resume the journey through the mountains.

Soon everything was ready, the gear swung on the back of the pack-mule, her horse and Ghent's watered and saddled. After a careful survey to see that nothing had been overlooked, Ghent helped her to mount and, swinging up on his own horse, reined back and motioned for her to go ahead of him along the trail.

Not a word had been spoken during the preparations for the trip. Ghent mentally resented Ruth's attitude. He was wholly unable to see the matter from her viewpoint. That he loved her seemed to him to be all that was necessary. Whether or not she loved him, and he believed that, in a way and in spite of herself, she did, was not, in his mind, an insuperable obstacle in the way of complete understanding and possible happiness.

Ruth, on the other hand, acknowledged to herself that, aside from his firmness in holding her to her promise—and she admitted that he had not sought the promise—he had been con-

siderate and even kind. But she resented his assuming so much authority over her. Her resentment was increased and her shame aroused by the thought that he had, in a way, bought her, body and soul. She entirely lost sight of the manner in which that transaction had occurred and the reason for it. Also she overlooked the fact that, to save her, he had deliberately placed his life in jeopardy when he proposed to Dutch to shoot it out.

Probably the thing that rankled most, although she would not have admitted it, was the sneering remark Dutch had made—"A ornery, dirt-eatin' buck Mojave'd pay more'n that fer his squaw."

CHAPTER XV

WIN NEWBURY did not return to the Jordan ranch that night nor the next day. In fact, it was not until very early morning on the day following that a weary young doctor, travel-stained and with dark circles around eyes that looked like holes burned in a blanket, rode slowly along the trail toward the ranch house.

The wild-eyed boy who had ridden up to the ranch house two nights before, with an insistent demand for Win's services, had been right, but had wholly understated the situation. There had been, as the boy had said, a "shootin'," and it apparently had been quite an affray. Aside from the boy's father, who had been an innocent bystander and whose leg had been broken by a ball from a heavy revolver, both of the combatants were decidedly the worse for wear. One of them, in fact, was in extremely bad shape. Consequently, what with reducing a fractured tibia for the boy's father and attending to a miscellaneous assort-

ment of gunshot wounds sustained by the two other men, to say nothing of working with all his skill in an attempt to keep within reasonable bounds a rapidly rising temperature which one of them was running, Win's time for many hours was reasonably full.

At last, when all three of his patients were doing as well as could be expected and were out of any immediate danger, Win, who had gone entirely without sleep and who had taken only such food as he could eat with one hand, while working with the other, had climbed on his horse and started on the fifteen-mile ride that separated Mesa Grande from the Jordan ranch.

There had been no opportunity to send word to Ruth and busy as he was, Win had worried over the thought of the girl he loved left alone on the ranch. It was with considerable relief, therefore, that as he topped the slight rise in the trail, he saw the shadowy outlines of the ranch buildings looming faintly through the early dawn. In spite of his weariness, he smiled and kicked his horse into a lope which soon brought him to the porch of the house.

No one was stirring. It was too early for

the Mexican ranch hands to have turned out and, of course, Ruth would be sound asleep. Too tired to ride back to the corral and turn his horse loose, Win slid heavily to the ground and, fastening the animal to a pillar, stepped up on the porch, moving quietly so as not to disturb Ruth. Wearily easing his tired body into a chair, he prepared to doze until there should be some sign of life about the place.

His horse tossed his head, causing the heavy bit to jingle, and then shook himself and snorted. Win sat up apprehensively, fearful that the noise would awaken Ruth. Then he decided to loosen the saddle-girth so that the horse would be more comfortable. As he started to do this, his glance fell on the door leading into the living room and he stopped in his tracks.

The door was ajar and the lock was broken!

All trace of weariness gone, Win dashed across the porch and flung open the door. For a moment he stood and listened, but there was a cold stillness about the place that told him as plainly as the spoken word that the house was empty.

In a moment he had lighted the wall lamp

and then he rushed towards Ruth's bedroom, the door of which was open.

"Ruth! Ruth!" he called sharply, but his voice sounded dull and flat, and was flung back at him by the adobe walls.

Into the kitchen he dashed, then into Philip's bedroom, calling always her name, "Ruth! Ruth!" over and over again. At times his voice would rise almost to a scream, then it would be a low sob like a moan, but always he called, "Ruth! Ruth!"

From Philip's bedroom he returned to the living room where the sickly yellow light from the wall lamp flared and threatened to go out. He was about to light the lamp on the center table when his ear detected the sound of wheels on the hard adobe outside.

He knew that Philip was returning and he was relieved for now they could plan and think, something he had been unable to do since his discovery that Ruth was gone. He stood where he was, waiting.

As Philip came into the room, he at once sensed from the look on Win's face that something was wrong.

"What's the matter?" he asked sharply.

"Ruth's gone!" gasped Win, grasping Philip by the arm.

"Gone!" exclaimed Philip. "Where could she go, and why? She must be around somewhere! Probably playing a joke on you." And as this seemed a likely explanation, Philip was relieved and began to laugh as he went to the table and lighted the big lamp.

As the clear yellow light flooded the room, Win glanced around, and his eyes lighted on the note lying on the desk where Ruth had left it. With a bound he reached the desk and snatched up the bit of paper which, as he read it, and the meaning slowly seeped into his bewildered mind, seemed like a death warrant to him.

"Joke!" And he laughed a bitter dry laugh that startled Philip. "Read that!" And he handed the bit of paper to Philip.

Taking the note, his eyes still on Win, Philip moved dazedly toward the lamp. He read what Ruth had written and then looked blankly at Win as if seeking an explanation, but the face of the young doctor was expressionless.

"Why, this is impossible!" cried Philip. "Whom could she have married? There isn't

a soul anywhere around here that she knows."

Win merely shrugged his shoulders, as though such a thing as an explanation was too big an effort for him to even try to frame in his present state of mind.

Gazing straight at him, Philip tried to do some rapid thinking, then holding the eyes of the doctor in his gaze, he walked slowly to him and placed a hand on either shoulder. For a moment Philip searched Win's face, then he spoke slowly: "Win, is this some sort of a joke you and Ruth are playing? Is it your way of telling me that you two have run off and been married? If it is, old man, it's a damned poor joke, but just trot Ruth out and I'll give you both the fraternal blessing."

At the thought of what might have been a look of pain came in Win's eyes and he sadly shook his head and said huskily:

"I would to God it was the way you say, Phil. I would be only too happy to shout it from the housetops, from the hills, so that the world might know. But it is not. No, there is something queer about all this, and I believe we should be doing something about it at once."

"You're right," replied Philip, as he threw a glance of compassion and understanding at the other. "We must do something and right away. But I want you to know, Win, that I, too, wish it had been the way I said."

"My God! Look, Phil! The door! It has been broken in from the outside!"

Win almost screamed as he dashed for the front door, to examine the broken frame which had been torn loose when Dutch and Shorty had thrown their combined weight against it. Lying on the floor in a shadow cast by the edge of the table was a splinter of the jamb. Win picked it up and held it in his hand, his jaws clinched and his breath coming in gasps as he looked at Philip, who stood near him staring down at the piece of wood, speechless.

"Come on, Win," said Philip, who was first to recover. "Let's go now, or we may be too late!" And he started for the door.

"How are we going?" asked Winthrop. "My horse is absolutely spent, and the two you drove to the buckboard must be all in. There isn't another horse on the place except Ruth's."

"Well, I'll take her horse," replied Philip.

“You take one of those belonging to the hands. Come on!” He started for the door, while Win turned to the fireplace, took down the rifle and revolver and examined them to make sure they were loaded and ready for whatever might occur. He had just finished this when Philip dashed back into the room, shouting:

“Ruth’s horse is gone and there isn’t a soul on the place! What’s happened is that those drunken Mexicans came back from the fiesta, found her alone and carried her off. God knows where they’ve gone, but we’ll start from Mesa Grande. Come on! We’ll take the horses from the buckboard; they’ll have to go the distance!” And he again started for the door, but Win stopped him.

“Wait a minute, Phil,” he said. “I wouldn’t put anything past those Mexicans, but I saw some of them just before I left Mesa Grande long before daylight, dead drunk to the world. I don’t believe they had a hand in this. I believe they are still celebrating. That note—Ruth wouldn’t have written that if she were kidnaped by Mexicans. They wouldn’t have sense enough to add such a touch of refinement to their dirty work.

“No, Phil,” he continued. “This is a white man’s job—a white man, faugh!—— God, old man, I can’t think clearly, this thing has broken me up so!”

And Win sank into a chair, holding his head in both hands, while Philip paced up and down the room distractedly, neither one in shape for connected thought.

It was Win, the doctor, trained to meet emergencies, who first recovered his poise.

“Now, listen, Phil!” he said. “The one thing we’ve got to avoid is the danger of going off half-cocked. We’re both done up, and the only horses available wouldn’t carry us half the distance to Mesa Grande, particularly at the rate we, in our present frame of mind, would make them travel. Remember, those animals are the only hope we’ve got and if they fail us, we’re through before we start.

“We haven’t an idea of what we’re going up against except that it is trouble and probably—undoubtedly—a fight. In our present shape we should lose in a fight with two small boys, let alone fiends such as are involved in this. And, Phil, if there is a fight, we simply must not lose.

"What we must do, therefore, is to rest awhile ourselves and, above all, let the horses rest. Come! Let's turn them into the corral."

Philip sprang up, his eyes blazing. "Rest!" he said. "You say you love Ruth and you talk of rest! My God, Win! What are you, a man of stone?" And he once more paced back and forth across the room.

"There, old man, there, now!" said Win, soothingly. "As I said, we'll gain nothing by going off half-cocked.

"Phil, look at those flowers on the floor," and Win pointed to the crushed and withered cactus blooms, lying where Dutch had dropped and then stepped on them.

"Those flowers," Win went on, "Ruth put in that vase just before you and Polly drove off, night before last. They were freshly picked then. If they had been thrown there last night, they would have been merely wilted instead of nearly dried up as they are.

"Phil, those flowers were thrown there, not last night, but night before last. Ruth has been gone since then. Whatever was going to happen to her has happened and we can't prevent it, God help us!

"But, Phil, old man, we can find her. We can punish those who have made her suffer and, please God, we can try to make her, in course of time, forget what has happened. To do that we shall need all of our strength and, even more than that, we shall need fresh horses. Therefore, I again say rest. It will be for only a little while, be sure of that." And Win placed his hand on Philip's shoulder and forced him into a chair.

"All right, then," said Philip. "But while we are resting, let's fix up the horses; rub 'em down and feed 'em, so they'll be fresh when we want them. What do you say to that?"

"Fine idea, Phil," replied Win. "I don't believe either of us could sit still with this thing on our minds, so we will get our rest by keeping busy. Come on, let's get at it." And Win removed his coat, rolled up his shirt sleeves and started toward the door.

Philip rose, took off his own coat and followed Win to the door where they both stopped for a moment to examine the broken frame. Shaking his head sadly, as he ran his hand over the splintered wood, Win slowly pulled the door shut and they went out to the waiting horses.

CHAPTER XVI

“WE’D better make camp here. It is a sheltered place, and there is plenty of water.” It was Ghent’s voice coming from close behind Ruth as she was guiding her horse over a twisting rocky trail high in the mountains. Ghent rode up beside her from his position in the rear, where he had been leading the pack-mule. As he spoke he dismounted and indicated with a wave of his hand the stream, the protecting wall of rock, and a broad, fairly level place that would serve well as a camping place.

Silently the girl nodded, and slowly swung from her horse without apparently seeing Ghent’s hand outstretched to aid her in dismounting. With a shrug of his shoulders Ghent went to his own horse, took off the saddle and bridle and then began to unload the pack-mule.

Ruth walked about to stretch her limbs, which ached from the long hours in the saddle

riding over the steep trail. Then, as the exercise eased the cramped muscles, she silently assisted in the work of preparing camp.

All that day they had traveled over desert and mountain, stopping once in the sparse shade of a huge cactus where Ghent had opened a tin of beef on which, with biscuits and lukewarm water from his canteen, they had lunched. The meager meal had been eaten in silence. Once or twice Ghent had looked keenly into the girl's face, but she had avoided his gaze as much as possible, and was truly thankful that he had permitted her to ride ahead, alone and in silence.

She watched idly now as Ghent threw the tent into position, and swiftly drew the ropes taut about the pegs which he had, with some difficulty, driven into the hard ground. He was very efficient, she thought, and she grew more interested as she noted the care with which he cleared the ground of sticks and pebbles before he spread her blankets, so that her bed should be as comfortable as the circumstances permitted.

Truly, she told herself, he had been kind to her in his own way. That he intended no harm

to her was manifest. Why should he have bothered about the marriage ceremony unless he meant well? True, it was a mockery, she thought, but he regarded it as a serious and binding thing. Above all, there was last night at the little camp in the mountains. He had left her alone, sleeping himself in the open beside the fire. Surely, that was not the act of a brute. And at breakfast, he had been so considerate and had tried to cheer her.

It was only when she had asked him to let her go back, alone, to her people, that he had turned hard. And, yet, with all that, he had been as considerate as possible of her during the long, hard ride which had just ended. No, he could not mean deliberately to harm her. She took comfort in the thought as she watched him at work.

He was a big man and, with the ravages of steady drinking now showing only slightly, not at all bad-looking, she thought. But he was without question rough and untamed. Then she thought of the "dream man" she had described to Polly—big and wild, like the country. Could Ghent be the man she had conjured up in her mind, always vaguely, never as a



A Metro-Goldwyn Picture.

THE JUSTICE OF THE PEACE TIES THE KNOT.

The Great Parade.

finished product. She smiled a little at the thought. No, he certainly was not a finished product. And then she thought of Win. He was finished, she had said. Poor, dear Win! She wondered what he was doing now—and Philip. Probably both were scouring the country in search of her, but they never could find her in this maze of mountain trails. Why, she would even be unable to find her way back to San Jacinto.

Then she looked again at Ghent, busy in the tent, and as he spread the last blanket she roused herself and started to make coffee over the fire he had previously kindled.

Some dry crackers, a can of beans heated over the fire and the coffee constituted their evening meal. By the time it was finished and the few utensils washed, the sun finally had disappeared and the night had come, swiftly as it does in that country. Both were tired and still silent, so there seemed nothing else to do but retire.

It was with a feeling of confidence that Ruth entered the tent to-night, leaving Ghent seated before the fire smoking his pipe. Somehow the smell of the burning tobacco which came faintly

to Ruth added a very homy atmosphere to the little camp. It seemed to bring a feeling of peace, and as she watched the puffs of smoke coming from Ghent's lips she believed that she understood the comfort that smoking brought to men.

Finding two spare blankets in the tent, she placed them on the ground outside the tent, imagining that Ghent left them by mistake when he arranged her bed.

From his position by the fire, Ghent watched her. He noted the lights and shadows reflected in her hair by the flickering of the fire, and he longed to run his fingers through that great mass of spun gold which he remembered having seen hanging about her like a mantle the night he had taken her away.

Only last night it was, and as he allowed his thoughts to dwell on it, the seeming unrealness of it struck him. Last night he had come with other fiends, intending mischief. To-night he was camping alone with the intended victim—his wife. Surely it must all be a dream from which he would at any moment awake.

He recalled his first glimpse of Ruth when he, with Shorty and Dutch, had looked through

the windows of the ranch house while the girl was preparing for bed, even as she was doing now under far different conditions.

His first reaction to the thought was blind anger that Shorty and Dutch had with their vulgar eyes gazed on the form of this woman with whom he, Ghent, had in the moment he looked into her face that night, fallen hopelessly and desperately in love. His jaw tightened, and he regretted that he had not shot Dutch through the head instead of in the legs and shoulder.

His second reaction was desire for this wonderful woman who, in spite of her coldness, he loved more with every passing moment. They were married—man and . . . No, not wife—not yet. He glanced toward the tent, but the flaps had been pulled into place.

Slowly he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and refilled it. Then from the fire he picked a brand, flaming slightly, and as he was applying it to the tobacco, Ruth came out of the tent opening and, looking at him with a smile, said pleasantly: "Good night!"

Then she turned and went back into the tent, allowing the flap to close after her.

For several moments Ghent sat staring at the tent. He had noticed that when Ruth came from the tent to wish him good night, she had removed her hat and jacket and that her waist was unfastened at the throat, as if she had stopped in the midst of undressing to speak to him.

He had noticed also that she showed no sign of fear, and he wondered at this. Was the barrier beginning to melt away? Was her coming from the tent to be construed as meaning that she now had made up her mind to abide by the arrangement, in effect, to become a party to it?

Ghent could not satisfactorily answer any of these questions, but the sight of the girl coming from the tent at the particular moment when he was craving her almost maddened him.

He rose to his feet, threw the burning brand back onto the fire, and laid the pipe down on a rock. Into his eyes there came a longing gleam as he slowly walked towards the tent. He did not know what he intended to do, but he felt that he must go to Ruth.

Within the tent Ruth loosened her clothing, and made herself as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, and then, seating herself on the bed of blankets Ghent had prepared for her, she began, by the light of the little camp lantern, to unlace her high riding boots.

There was no fear in her heart; she believed that this night would be exactly the same as the night before. She heard Ghent's footsteps outside, but she thought nothing of it, believing that he was coming for the blankets she had placed outside the tent.

One boot unlaced she removed it, and stretched her foot to relieve the somewhat cramped muscles. Suddenly she was conscious of being under scrutiny, and quickly pulling her leg up under her and clutching at the throat of her waist, she glanced up at the tent-flaps where she saw Ghent's face. She drew back, all the terrors of the night before coming back to her with a rush.

Slowly Ghent parted the tent flaps and stepped in. Ruth began to shake her head in wild protest, but he still came on, finally seating himself on the blankets facing her. She felt

like an animal in a trap; before her the hunter, back of her the tent walls securely pegged down.

"No, no, you mustn't!" she almost screamed, as Ghent reached forth a hand to touch her.

"Don't touch me! Please, I beg of you, spare me now! Don't put your hands on me!" The girl was almost beside herself with fear.

Slowly he drew back his hand, to the mingled relief and wonder of the girl. He sat gazing at her.

Then, again, he reached forth his hand and Ruth weakly permitted him to take hers. They sat thus for what seemed ages to her. Then, in fear lest her seeming acquiescence in permitting him to take her hand might be misconstrued, she said:

"Please, you are hurting me! Won't you go away now and think this over?"

Ghent shook his head slowly and spoke quietly, tenderly.

"No, dear. You are mine and I am going to stay."

Then he turned and extinguished the little camp lantern.

CHAPTER XVII

THE following day was one of torment and loathing for Ruth. Since early morning, since she had awakened after a night begun in terror, she had not uttered a word. Never again, she thought, could she look this man in the face. Never again could she look at the members of her family, even should they succeed in finding her which now she prayed they would not.

Ghent had been kind, even tender, and it was plain to see that what had occurred had served to deepen the feeling of regard for her that had been apparent in his every action since he had taken her away from the ranch. It was only that their ideas of the meaning of regard were as wide apart as the poles.

She was unable to analyze her feelings toward this man. He had outraged everything she believed to be right and righteous. Yet while she hated him for it one minute, she found herself on the point of forgiving him the next.

When she thought of his coming to her in the tent the night before, deaf to her pleadings, she loathed him. And yet, when she recalled the tone in which he had said, "Now you are my wife"; when she thought of his solicitude for her comfort and his regret, almost amounting to remorse, over her attitude, she experienced a far different and less understandable sentiment toward him.

Ghent's reactions were entirely different. He still maintained the same point of view, and his actions of the night before were to him, the natural consummation of the pact they had made. That he might have brought fright and a possible loathing for himself to the girl did not occur to him. He loved her and what had taken place was what should have taken place.

Both the man and the girl were complexes, though neither suspected or gave the matter any thought. For years Ruth had been crying out against convention and tradition. Now, when she was set down in the midst of a wildly unconventional situation, her innermost soul cried out against it, and at the same time that other part of her reached out and embraced it.

Ghent was a mixture of good and bad. For

years he had traveled the down grade. One look into the eyes of Ruth Jordan and he had been reborn. The bad in him conjured up before his mind the girl as he first glimpsed her through the ranch house window; the bad had fed his animal desire, and made him take her over her protests. But the good in him made him love her more afterwards, and as he rode silently along behind her, his eyes glowed with the knowledge of possession.

He marveled at this feeling. He had known women, many of them; he had possessed them for a time, short perhaps, but always there was a loathing for them and himself. With this woman whom he had made his wife, there was only an awakening of a deeper love than had stirred him when he first looked upon her, and he was glad. There was a song in his heart as he rode along toward the mine which would enable him to buy so many beautiful things for the girl—and home.

Ruth had had the forethought on leaving the camp that morning to carry some biscuits with her, and she ate these as she rode along, so that it was not necessary to stop for lunch. She was glad of this, for she did not feel able to look

at Ghent. She avoided his gaze, and spoke not a word to him from the time they broke camp until now, late in the afternoon, they slowly began the descent toward the mine.

Lon Anderson and Burt Williams had just wheeled a car of ore from the tunnel when the quick, bespectacled eyes of the former discovered the two riders and the pack-mule above them.

“Thar’s th’ b-b-boss,” he shouted to Burt, “b-b-but I c-c-can’t make out who’s wi-wi-with him.”

“Wonder who it c’d be,” remarked Burt. “Who does he know that he’d bring here?”

“What duh you c-c-care?” retorted Lon. “He b-b-brought you an’ me here, d-d-didn’ he, and he didn’ know us f’m th’ bottom p-p-plates o’ hell. I’ll bet if he knowed you ’s w-w-well ’s I do, he wouldn’t n-n-never have b-b-brought yuh here at all.”

“By g-g-golly!” Lon went on, gazing beneath his hand at the party slowly winding down the trail, “I believe t-t-t’other’s a woman! Yes, sir, a f-f-female woman!”

"Must be drunker'n usual if that there's the case," remarked Burt as he spat in disgust.

"Not half as d-d-drunk as he w-w-was when he b-b-brought you back, yuh ornery s-s-son-of-a-gun," retorted Lon, with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Then glancing at the mine entrance, he said: "Hey, you s-s-stay here an' git things k-k-kinder in shape while I t-t-take a run up an' s-s-see th' boss."

"And what he brought along," sneered Burt.

"O' c-c-course! Did juh think I would shut m-m-muh eyes and not l-l-look at the other p-p-person?" replied Lon, as he started toward the path. Burt turned with a shrug of his shoulders and began to pick up tools and odds and ends that littered the ground around the entrance to the mine.

Lon ran quickly up the path to the cabin and arrived just as Ghent and Ruth reached the level ground in front of the shack. Lon was not sure that he approved of women around the camp, but he was pleased to observe that the one the boss had brought was not at all difficult to look at.

He remained in the background until Ghent had dismounted and turned to the girl, saying: "Well, we are home!" He watched as Ghent offered to aid Ruth in dismounting, but she refused the proffered hand and swung down from her horse herself.

Then Lon came forward, hat in hand. Ghent shook hands with him, and when Lon saw that the boss was not only sober, but looking better than ever before, he transferred his gaze to Ruth, feeling that she must be the one responsible for the great change.

"Lon, this is my wife," said Ghent by way of introduction. Then to Ruth, before Lon could do anything more than swallow a couple of times, "Ruth, this is Lon, my foreman, upon whom I place a great deal of dependence."

Ruth inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment while Lon stood grinning like a fool, scraping his right foot in the ground.

There was one thing Lon always did when embarrassed, and that was reach into his hip-pocket for the ever-present flask and take a good nip. It always helped him. He had never been so embarrassed in his life as he was at this moment, so he quickly reached back for his own

particular first-aid kit when Ghent's voice stopped him.

"None of that, Lon!" said Ghent severely. "There'll be no drinking about the mine, or here. I want that understood, and I want you to see that it is understood."

Meekly Lon withdrew his hand which he passed dazedly across his forehead. Ghent never could know how close he had come to losing the services of a very valuable employee from shock when he forbade present and future drinking.

"Call Burt, will you, Lon? I want to say a few words to both of you while they are fresh in my mind," said Ghent, as he turned toward Ruth.

Lon hastened down the path, his mind in a whirl. Never in all the time he had been with Ghent had that person returned from a spree less than half drunk, and without a plentiful supply of liquor. Now he was back, sober as a judge, and shutting down on all drinking. It was too much for Lon, and he raised a yell for Burt Williams to "c-c-come runnin'" and hear the disturbing news.

For several moments Ruth gazed about her.

The cabin was set on a high hill overlooking great spaces of beautiful country. On all sides were the great mountains, the same any way one looked, and the air was clear, fragrant and invigorating.

With a slow sweep of his hand, Ghent indicated the little cabin and said: "As I remarked once before—we're home."

Ruth glanced through the half-open door, and her heart sank at the desolate look of the place. But she threw the feeling off, remembering the altogether uninviting first appearance of the ranch house. Slowly she stepped through the door, leaving Ghent standing just outside watching her.

An involuntary shudder passed through her as she went into the squalid room. She turned and looked appealingly at Ghent, and over him came a wave of great pity and love for the girl, and as she went farther into the room, disappearing in the shadows, he murmured to himself: "My wife! My wife!"

CHAPTER XVIII

ABOUT two weeks after their arrival at the cabin in the mountains, Ghent went to San Francisco to purchase machinery and supplies for the mine. A great change had come over the place in those two weeks. For one thing, Ruth, with the willing assistance of Burt Williams and old Lon, who had become her abject slaves, had transformed the cabin from a squalid shack into a habitable abode. The place was clean and bright with paint, gay cretonnes and Navajo rugs, to obtain which the enamored Burt had made the four-day journey to San Jacinto and back with never a thought but of serving the boss' lady.

Around the door were flowers and blossoming shrubs for which Lon had searched the mountains and transplanted bodily, tending them with the care a mother bestows on her first-born.

The camp stove had been mended and Lon and Burt disputed for the honor of keeping

the woodbox—a new, clean one—filled with firewood. It was a camp transformed.

Added to all this, the work at the mine was going ahead full blast. Lon had ridden out at Ghent's command, and rounded up a bunch of experienced miners and the ore was coming out faster than it could be handled. Consequently, Ghent found himself under the necessity of installing modern mechanical equipment to take care of the increased output.

Then, far back in the Number 1 tunnel, a new vein had been uncovered which looked good on a cursory inspection and which, when assayed, convinced Ghent that he had struck a near-bonanza.

“Wha' d' I t-t-tell yuh, b-b-boss?” Lon had exulted, when the assayer's report was received. “I w-w-wanted yuh tuh g-g-go after th' ol' girl hard l-l-long ago, but yuh wouldn't listen t-t-tuh me.”

“I know, Lon,” Ghent had replied. “But there wasn't anything in particular to work for then. Now there is; I've got a wife and she's got to have everything I can get for her.

“I'm starting for the Coast to-morrow, Lon. You look after things while I'm gone.”

Ghent was busy in San Francisco. He attended to the matter of the machinery and supplies and arranged to have them shipped to the most convenient point for packing over the mountains. He made several other purchases, but he spent most of his time in consultation with an architect.

Consequently, when he stopped first for a few minutes at the mine on his return, he carried a roll of plans for a new house to be built on the hilltop, on the site of the present cabin. He exhibited these to Lon and Burt, who greeted him at the mine, pointing out the music-room and the bathroom, the like of which was not—in that part of Arizona, at any rate.

Then he hurried on to the cabin, eager to greet Ruth whom he had missed more than he would have believed possible in the old days. The old days!—Only about a month past.

“Lookut what a g-g-good woman’ll d-d-do fer a m-m-man,” Lon remarked as Ghent hurried along the path, whistling joyously. “Lookut what one d-d-did fer the boss. Why, d-d-damn it, he’s a new man! No g-g-grouch any more! No boozin’! R-r-reg’lar!” Then,

after a pause: "Think I'll g-g-git me a woman."

This brought a howl from Burt, who observed judicially: "In th' first place, yuh couldn't git a woman tuh have yuh, an' in the second place, it 'ud take a damn sight more'n a woman c'd do tuh make you reg'lar, yuh ol' son-of-a-gun."

At which injurious remark, Lon dragged a flask from his hip-pocket and, as he watched Ghent's figure disappear over the crest of the rise, he took a long drink that emptied the bottle, which he then broke into little pieces by pounding it with a convenient shovel. Noticing Burt looking at him queerly, Lon said:

"Waal, I hadda g-g-git rid of it, so's he wouldn't find out, d-d-didn't I?"

Ruth was at the stove preparing dinner as Ghent stepped into the now cheerful room, the plans for the house held behind his back. In a way Ruth was glad to see him, although she secretly disliked to admit it. She had lost the feeling of revulsion that had at first come over her, following that night in the mountain camp; in its place had come a species of resignation, not unmingled with real regard, for he

had been kind to her and had many times gone out of his way to demonstrate his affection for her in a manner at once tender and considerate. She noted the regard Lon and Burt had for him, and she had to admit that he possessed many good qualities.

She looked up as he entered, but there was little in the way of greeting in her manner and it hurt Ghent a little. He had hoped she would be glad to see him. However, whatever she did was all right in his eyes, so he merely smiled and said: "Ruth, come here a minute, please."

Slowly she came to him, and he thrust his hand into his pocket and took from it three velvet covered boxes which he placed on the table. One contained a ring set with magnificent stones, another a bracelet and the third a beautiful brooch.

Ghent, anticipating the pleasure he thought she would get from the gifts, waved his hands toward them, saying: "A little gift for you."

"For me?" she asked in surprise, sinking into a chair beside the table and gazing at them.

"Yes," he replied gayly. "But that isn't

all! Look at this!" And he unrolled the plans and spread them out on the table.

"Within three months I'm going to build you a house, here on this spot, just like that." And Ghent tapped the drawing with his hand.

Ruth leaned over the plans and looked at the drawings intently; then she looked at the jewelry which had been placed to one side. She gazed without emotion, without a sign of any kind.

Not knowing what was in her mind, Ghent leaned over and, very much like a boy showing a new toy, placed his forefinger on the plans and said: "Spanish style—with a bathroom opening right off the bedroom; and see—there is a living-room and a music-room."

With just the slightest indication of the plans, Ruth asked dully: "How much will this house cost?"

Ghent was surprised at her question, but he smiled and replied: "Oh, I don't know; around \$25,000 I should say." This with a deprecating wave of the hand as though it was a small matter.

Ruth nodded her head as if she understood. Then her gaze took in the three pieces of

jewelry, and she again asked: "And these; what did these cost?"

"Oh, a few hundreds," answered Ghent, rather at a loss to understand her.

Slowly Ruth took her eyes from the plans and the jewelry and, looking straight at Ghent, said coldly: "My price has risen!"

"What do you mean?" said Ghent, completely taken aback by her remark.

She looked at him steadily, her body tense, then she said, slowly: "Just a few short days ago, it was a string of gold nuggets, and now . . ." She stared hard at him, and he dropped his eyes under the fixed gaze as, with a sweeping gesture that included the house plans and the jewelry, she continued: "It is twenty-five thousand dollars and these."

As she finished speaking she picked up the jewelry and looked at the plans, while Ghent, stunned beyond words by the unexpected manner in which she received the gifts from which he had anticipated she would derive pleasure, stood silently watching her.

Suddenly a wave of hysteria swept over her, and she threw the jewels down on the table and laughed and laughed. Then she was quiet for

a moment and then, suddenly, almost screamed: "My price has risen!"

Before Ghent had an opportunity to answer, Lon appeared in the doorway and said: "A c-c-couple o' men tuh see yuh, b-b-boss."

Ghent hurried out, intent upon shielding Ruth from the visitors, whoever they might be, but Ruth's gaze followed him, and she saw approaching the house her brother Philip and Win Newbury. She gave a little cry which caused Ghent to look at her quickly and ask: "Who are they? Do you know them?"

"Yes," she answered. "It is my brother, and an old school friend." And Ghent stiffened and prepared for the trouble that he felt certain was coming.

Stepping closer to the door, Ruth called out, at the same time waving her hand as the two came on rapidly. The sight of these old, staunch friends almost brought tears to her eyes, but she had pride, so she controlled herself with an effort and ran to meet them.

"Philip, dear old Phil!" she exclaimed, and in a moment was in his arms and he had kissed her. All her fears, all her troubles were wiped away when those big arms went around her,

and she felt safe and snug in a refuge that could and would never refuse her sanctuary.

Standing just behind Philip was Win, visibly embarrassed, for he sensed the unusual in the situation. Ruth quickly held out her hand to welcome him, while Philip took a step or two toward Ghent who stood in the doorway watching the action before him and waiting for his part to begin. That it would be unpleasant, he hadn't a doubt, but he would fight for his own.

"Ruth, we searched everywhere for you," said Win, and there was joy in his voice that they had found her, apparently unharmed.

"Why, I left a note that explained everything," answered Ruth with a smile and a show of surprise.

"Explained nothing!" growled Philip. "It was just by chance that we stumbled on the record of your marriage over at San Jacinto."

"Oh," suddenly spoke up Ruth, as though she had forgotten something, then she turned and, beckoning to Ghent, called pleasantly:

"Stephen!"

His name from her lips was the sweetest music he had ever heard, he thought. He hoped she would call again, but she didn't. She

merely kept crooking her forefinger at him, almost coquettishly, so he slowly walked towards her.

As he approached Ruth she placed her arm through his and said: "Stephen, this is my brother Philip, and Dr. Winthrop Newbury, a very dear friend," indicating each in turn.

Philip merely glared for a moment, then nodded his head in acknowledgment. Win looked at Ghent and smiled, and Ghent liked him at once.

"My husband," said Ruth, indicating Ghent, and she almost choked over the words.

Win came forward with hand outstretched, and it was grasped in Ghent's firm grip. The situation was still somewhat tense, so Ruth again came to the front to save it, saying: "Well, why do we stand here? Let's go in where there are chairs." And throwing an arm about Philip, she led him towards the cabin. Win lingered for a moment with Ghent and said: "I hear you have a very wonderful mine; may I ask what you call it?"

Ghent looked at him for a moment, and then allowed his eyes to follow Ruth, as he said: "I have recently named it 'The White Virgin.'"

"A very appropriate name," answered Win, as he also gazed after Ruth.

Ruth and Philip went on into the cabin where they were quickly joined by Ghent and Win, who had apparently taken a great liking to each other.

It was a difficult position for Ruth, but she endeavored to make the best of it. Her great pride was a help, and she made the conversation and tried to be the very life of the little gathering.

Win took a chair by the end of the table and casually glanced over the plans still spread out there. Ruth followed his gaze, and noticing the jewelry she picked it up with a little laugh, saying to the others: "Look at these; Stephen brought them to me from San Francisco." And she fastened the brooch to the bosom of her dress, slipped the ring on her finger, and allowed Ghent to fasten the bracelet on her wrist.

Then she pointed to the plans and said: "That is the house Stephen is going to build for me right here in these beautiful hills. Isn't it wonderful?"

As she said this, she pulled Stephen down to

a place beside her on the couch, facing the table, and held his hand in one of hers. Ghent at once placed his other hand over hers and fondled it.

Ruth involuntarily shuddered at the part she was playing, and Philip was quick to notice the movement. He had a feeling that all was not well.

Holding Ghent's gaze with a steady look, he said: "Would you mind telling how and when and where you met my sister?"

For a moment Ghent returned the rather unfriendly stare, and then calmly replied: "One night I looked into her eyes, and I knew I had found the one woman for whom I had been searching."

"A pretty speech," retorted Philip, "but it doesn't explain the broken door-jamb." He leaned forward as he spoke, and Ruth, sensing possible trouble, spoke quickly: "I can explain that, Philip dear. The night you left me to take Polly to the station, bandits broke in. Stephen was passing, heard the disturbance, came in, shot up the place a little, and rescued me."

And with a slight shrug of the shoulders and the spreading of her arms and hands, as if to

say: "What better explanation could you desire?" she glanced about her at the men.

Philip nodded his head as if accepting the explanation, but he glared at Ghent as though he still held him under suspicion.

A hissing sound from the stove recalled to Ruth her culinary duties and she quickly ran to rescue the food which threatened to boil over. Looking back, she said: "Dinner will be ready in a few moments. You and Win will stay, of course."

But although she was joined by Ghent in pressing the invitation, both Philip and Win declined and decided to leave at once. The situation was a little too tense for them.

When they reached the door, Win and Ghent went on outside, while Philip took Ruth in his arms and said: "Remember, sister, if you have anything to complain about, I have a right to know it."

Ruth nodded, then said: "But, Philip, there is nothing."

Philip smiled grimly and soon joined Win, who shook hands warmly with Ghent as the two men started down the trail. Philip merely nodded curtly to Ghent, who stood by Ruth,

who waved her handkerchief until the two men disappeared around a bend in the trail.

There were tears in her eyes as she turned and slowly went into the cabin. Once inside she tore the jewelry from her throat, finger and wrist, and tossed it on the table with the plans of the new house.

Ghent came to her and said: "Why did you pretend just now?"

One withering, scornful look she gave him as she replied: "They are my people, and I was ashamed." She hesitated, then walked to the window and gazed out as if to catch a fleeting glimpse of her brother and Win, but they had gone. She turned back towards Ghent, who stood as if dazed, the same scorn in her eyes and voice as she went on: "I was ashamed to let them know that you had bought me for a handful of gold . . ." Ghent winced and would have stopped her, but she waved aside his attempt at speech, continuing, "that you drove me before you like an animal from the market."

Ghent went close to her, saying: "Won't you ever forget that? Don't you know that every good woman is bought in one way or another?"

Ruth did not reply. She mused for a moment, then a look, half pity, half disdain, came into her eyes, as she said, more to herself, than to him:

“That night, when we rode away from the judge’s house—and you spared me, the ice which had gathered about my heart began to melt a little.”

Ghent glanced quickly up at this seeking to find in her expression some sign of hope for him. There was none and he buried his face in his hands as Ruth, her voice vibrant with emotion, went on: “I said to myself that night, ‘He has heard my prayer; in spite of all there may be hope for us both.’ ”

Ghent held out his hand protestingly, but the girl ignored him, and biting scorn came into her voice, as she continued:

“And the next night—when you came to my tent—I knew we were lost; that you hadn’t the strength; that you weren’t big enough to save us both.”

Ghent stood up quickly, a deep fire in his eyes, as he leveled a finger at her, and, in a voice choked with feeling, said: “Yes,—I remember that night; I’ll never forget it. I be-

lieved you cold—but you returned my kisses, and I thought——”

“Stop!” cried Ruth. “Don’t try to fasten part of the blame on me. I was weak, I know, but I thought you were big—strong—that you could save us both. But you weren’t; you were weaker than I. . . . You failed me. . . . You failed yourself. . . . You . . .” She was becoming hysterical.

Ghent went to her and said soothingly, pleadingly, his voice vibrating with emotion: “Ruth, for God’s sake, let’s not dash ourselves to hell in one crazy moment. . . .”

Then there came a voice from the doorway, saying:

“I thought something was wrong; that’s why I came back.”

Ruth and Ghent turned as one, and there in the doorway stood Philip, a hard look in his eyes, his lips pursed in a white line. How long he had been standing there neither Ruth nor Ghent knew, and both were so astounded that they merely stared at him in silence.

Philip at that moment was master of the situation, and he knew it. He stepped into the room and without even glancing at Ghent said

to Ruth: "Come! I am going to take you home."

Ghent recovered quickly and replied coolly: "Oh, no, you're not!"

Ruth had rushed to Philip's side and, as he stood with an arm around her, he looked over her head at Ghent, saying:

"She is coming home—with me—and you will not follow."

For a moment, the two men held each other's eyes, coldly, defiantly. Then Ghent, his eyes softening as his glance went to Ruth, sobbing on Philip's shoulder, broke the tense silence.

Stepping closer, the better to see Ruth's face, he nodded at her and said calmly, slowly:

"That, Ruth, is for you to decide." Then he stepped back and stood silent, waiting for her reply.

Scarcely believing she had heard aright, Ruth looked at him in amazement. She had expected a struggle between the two men and, rather than have Philip worsted in such an encounter, as she instinctively felt he would be, she had made up her mind to remain with Ghent.

But he had left the choice with her. She

gazed at him and in that moment knew that he loved her and that because of that love, he was willing to sacrifice his own happiness in order that she might be free.

There flashed across her mind memories of Ghent's efforts to show his regard for her—and the manner in which she had received those efforts, and she felt a sense of unworthiness surging over her. This man had given her his all and how had she repaid him? She was ashamed. She could no longer meet his eye. So she turned again to Philip and said, with a sob:

“Oh, take me away! Take me with you—take me—home!”

Philip drew her close to him and turned to Ghent with a grim smile. Then, without a word, he turned and led her from the cabin and down the trail to where Win Newbury waited. Returning, he went to the little shack that served as a stable, to get Ruth's horse, but found that Ghent had anticipated him.

“One moment!” said Ghent quietly. “I will attend to this. After all, this is my home, such as it is, and Ruth is my wife.” And he led out Starlight, saddled and bridled and

handed the rein to Philip, who turned, without speaking, and went to join the others. Ruth sobbed bitterly, her heart torn between joy and sorrow. Joy that she was at last free; sorrow that she was causing pain to this big man who now stood in the cabin door looking after them as they slowly went along the trail. Above all, however, the feeling of shame—of failure—continued.

Ghent watched the three figures until they disappeared around the bend in the trail, then his dreams crumbled. He turned and went into the room, now cold and cheerless. Picking up the trinkets he had bought for Ruth, he looked at them fondly. . . . She had worn them, if only for a few minutes. Then his eyes wandered to the plans on the table where he had first spread them out. The plans of the house which had been such a joy to him. The windows and the doorway in the drawing looked up at him like some hideous face, gazing at him with a mocking smile. He threw himself into a chair, then lowered his head on his arms and sobbed.

CHAPTER XIX

GHEENT stood alone at the edge of the high mesa overlooking the mine workings, and gazed far off over the new mine buildings, toward the distant mountains, away to the south. He loved these great, silent, rocky heights with their beautifully variegated strata, the colors showing, now vividly in the sunlight and now several tones darker as the sun went behind some projecting point of rock.

Even before he met and loved Ruth, these great hills had fascinated him and, in his darkest moments, he could come to this spot and find consolation in the sheer beauty of the scene. Now, even that consolation was denied him. The far-off, high-flung piles reminded him of giant graves in which love and hope might be buried under great mounds of rock so that they never could be dug up.

Below him lay the mine, smoke pouring from the chimneys of the new smelter and stamping

mill. Activity was everywhere. The machinery ordered months ago had been installed, Ghent superintending and working long hours with an energy that bespoke ragged nerves. The mine fairly vomited gold. He was rich, rich beyond his wildest dreams. Yet, he told himself, he was poorer than any of the men who worked and sweated in his mine.

Every day, just at evening, the time that Ruth had gone away with her brother and Win Newbury, Ghent would walk to the edge of the mesa and watch the trail where it went around the bend, close to the high wall of rock. It was at this point that he had caught the last glimpse of Ruth, that evening when she passed out of his life, the sun lighting up her wonderful hair and giving it the effect of a halo.

In his mind always at these times, there was a childlike hope that some day she would come back to him, around that bend with joy in her heart, and a song on her lips.

Months now he had waited and watched, but always he would return to his lonely cabin, there to brood in silence until sheer exhaustion forced his tired eyes to sleep.

In less than three months it would be a year from the time he had first seen this wonderful girl, and carried her away for such a brief moment of happiness. He wondered what she had been doing all those weary days and weeks and months.

He had sent Lon at regular intervals to the Jordan ranch with money for Ruth, but he received never a message in return. In fact, Lon had had only the merest glimpses of Ruth on the occasions of his visits. She seemed to want to avoid anybody or anything that had the slightest connection with Ghent. Even now, as Ghent stood on the mesa, overlooking the wonderfully rich holdings of "The White Virgin," he was waiting for the return of Lon, who had been sent to the Jordan ranch a few days before to see if he could get any definite word concerning Ruth.

His keen eyes detected Lon coming rapidly from the direction of the mine, and he turned to meet the faithful old friend whose devotion had meant so much to him in the long months since Ruth had gone.

Lon dashed up, breathless, and stood panting before Ghent. Then, as he regained control of

himself, he said: "B-b-boss, I saw her an' she l-l-looked t-t-turrible! She's thin's a s-s-starved c'yote; and she's w-w-workin' like a d-d-damn squaw on a Indian blanket loom makin' b-b-blankets, an' a Mex workin' on the p-p-place tol' me she's b-b-been adoin' it fer months, an' she t-t-takes 'em to town t' s-s-sell 'em."

"Why should she do that?" demanded Ghent wrathfully.

He turned and gazed over the mine workings, and said: "My God! 'The White Virgin' belching out gold, and she working like a half-starved squaw!"

Lon nodded his head, as if to give emphasis to the words of Ghent, who stood silent for a moment, then turned to Lon and said: "Get me my hat, coat, and gun. I'll saddle the horse. I am going to her now!"

"Now yer t-t-tootin'!" yelled Lon, as he dashed for the cabin.

Hastily putting on his coat and hat and buckling the big automatic around his hips, Ghent swung into the saddle, saying to Lon: "Look after things! I'm going now, and God help any one who tries to prevent me from seeing her!"

All that afternoon Ruth had worked steadily at her Indian loom, trying to finish the blanket it held before she would be compelled to give up her work through sheer weakness.

Win Newbury, who had been a constant visitor, and had done everything in his power to lighten the burden of woe which she had seemed unable to throw off, frequently had chided her for working so hard, telling her that it was unnecessary and not at all good for her.

But to all his entreaties she had replied: "No, Win, you simply don't understand. I must go on with it."

Compassion was in the eyes of this school-day friend as he took the hands, now roughened by the unusual toil they had been doing for many months, and said: "Ruth, dear, you know I love you better than anything else in the world. Why not let me try to make you happy?"

She smiled at him sadly, and patting his hand, said: "No, Win, dear. It is destiny. I cannot . . . at least not now. . . . Please do not ask me."

And Newbury silently bowed, and a short time later took his departure for his own cabin in the hills.

Polly Jordan had returned from her visit to the East, and had contritely tried to atone for her previous actions by doing all she could to cheer Ruth and lighten her burden. But she could not ease the ache that was in that weary heart.

Sometimes Ruth would almost make up her mind to return to Ghent. She missed, though she scarcely would admit it to herself, all the little kindnesses he had shown her and his constant thoughtfulness. Then as she recalled how they both had overridden convention she would turn cold and harden her heart against him.

As darkness came down, her fingers numbed by the grip on the crude bobbin, Ruth sat for a moment to rest. Polly was in the kitchen superintending the preparation of the evening meal, which must be ready when Philip returned from Mesa Grande whither he had gone to attend to some business.

Taking a book from the table, Ruth idly glanced through it. Suddenly there was a blinding flash of lightning, followed almost immediately by a crash of thunder that brought Polly on a run from the kitchen. Then the rain began to pour down in torrents.

"What a night!" exclaimed Polly, as she went to the window and looked out, to be almost at once driven back with a scream of fright, by a second flash of lightning, and the reverberating clap of thunder, which rolled away off into the mountains.

"It will do the land a lot of good," remarked Ruth.

Calmed somewhat by Ruth's attitude, Polly returned to the kitchen and resumed her duties.

Ruth sat still, each succeeding flash of lightning seeming to heighten the color which had been rising in her face. She felt weak, tired, and as she turned and looked at the loom standing in the corner of the living room, she shuddered.

There was a sound of feet on the floor of the veranda, and Ruth half rose to greet Philip who should have returned about this time and would be wet through. She turned with a smile on her lips, the door was suddenly flung open, allowing the rain to drive into the room, and there standing before her, his clothes dripping, was Stephen Ghent.

CHAPTER XX

RUTH stood staring in utter amazement and then sank slowly back into her seat. Then, as Ghent closed the door and advanced into the room, she threw up her hand as if to keep him away.

Ghent saw the cruel callous spots and torn flesh on the hand raised against him, and winced. Then, with all the kindness and sympathy he felt sounding in his voice, he said:

“Forgive me, Ruth, for appearing to spy on you. But Lon told me what you have been doing and I just had to come to you.”

Again he looked at her hand which she still held in protest towards him, and, noticing his gaze, she hid it in her lap. She waited for him to speak again.

“Why should you work like this—like a half-starved squaw—when there is a mine back there in the Cordilleras that is fairly sending out gold in a stream; gold that belongs to you as much as it does to me?”

Ruth stood up and crossed the room to the window, where she gazed out at the storm despite the lightning that flashed almost continuously. Then she faced Ghent, and fairly hurled the words at him with all the scorn she could put into her voice.

"First it was a string of nuggets, then a big house . . . now"—and she laughed wildly—"it is a gold mine! Again my price has risen!"

Ghent held out his hand in protest, saying: "Does it rankle that I took you off that night by main strength and fraud if you will? Most good women are taken that way, if they only knew it!"

"That may be," she answered. "But most good women are not taken as I was taken . . ."—she hesitated, and then continued—"by a human beast that went to its horrible pleasure in pack—something that even an animal does not do." Loathing, repugnance, hatred was in the look she gave him, and he turned away to hide the shame and humiliation he felt.

Collecting herself, Ruth with a sign to Ghent, reached into the bosom of her dress, and quickly drew over her head the string of

nuggets he had given Shorty that night in this very room.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"I bought it!" she almost screamed. "Look at these!" And she held up both work-scarred hands. "That's why I made those blankets—to earn money with my own hands, to buy back this symbol of my slavery!

"Oh, I suppose you think I am silly," she continued bitterly, "but when I saw this necklace for sale in a store in Mesa Grande, I grasped the opportunity to possess the thing that was the price you paid for me. The money you sent me by Lon I have never touched. This"—and she held the string of nuggets toward him—"was paid for by my own labor. . . . Take it . . . and go."

Throughout her speech Ghent had stood motionless, transfixed, but as she held the necklace toward him, he shook his head and said quietly but firmly: "No, Ruth!—You are mine now . . . and forever!"

As the full meaning of his words dawned upon her, she stood gazing helplessly at him, then, drawing a little closer, she again held out the string of nuggets, saying:

“Take it, please! . . . If not for my sake . . . for the sake of another life to come!”

She swayed weakly as she finished, the exertion of the last few minutes had been too much for her in her condition. Ghent slowly reached out his arms and took her to him, and she did not, could not, resist. There was a new light in his eyes as he said: “Ruth, is this really true?” She nodded her head slowly, unable to meet his gaze, and Ghent breathed a silent prayer.

Then he said tenderly: “No, Ruth, not now! You are mine now more than ever.” And he held her close, although she struggled to free herself.

“How yours?” she demanded, pulling back from him. “Bought like a woman of the streets!” A shudder ran through her.

But Ghent held her closer as he said:

“Mine by the almighty forces of Nature—whether you like it or not!”

Fiercely she struggled to free herself as she began to cry hysterically, calling: “No, no, no!” her voice reaching to the farthest corner of the house. Just as Polly, attracted by the cry, ran in from the kitchen, Ruth gave one

final piercing scream and fainted in Ghent's arms.

Ghent surveyed Polly and then said: "I am Stephen Ghent. We must do something for Ruth."

"Yes," weakly admitted Polly. "We must do something." Then a happy thought struck her and she said: "Take her to her room."

And Ghent, with the unconscious form of his wife in his arms, strode into the bedroom and tenderly placed her on the bed.

Ruth moaned a little, her lips moved, and incoherent words came from them in a jumble. Polly, who had followed Ghent into the bedroom, stared down at her, wincing each time she moaned.

"What can be the matter?" asked Ghent, as he suggested that Polly remove Ruth's shoes.

"It must be the baby," replied Polly. Then as Ghent stared in wonder and disbelief, she continued: "It's almost time."

Ghent for once was at a loss. At no time in his career, which had covered many phases of life, had he been so close to the miracle of life itself, and he was afraid.

Polly was just as helpless as Ghent, and they

stood and first looked at each other, then down at the pain-wracked woman on the bed.

There was a sound in the living room, and both Ghent and Polly turned as Philip strode in, dripping wet, taking off his hat and hanging it on the peg near the door.

Polly ran to him just as he discovered the presence of Ghent, standing beside Ruth's bed. His first impulse was to rush for the intruder, but Polly grasped his arm, saying, pleadingly: "No, Philip, not now! You must go for Dr. Newbury right away. Ruth is . . . very sick."

"My God!" exclaimed Philip, as he grabbed his hat and dashed for the door, and as Polly returned to the bedroom she heard the hoofs of his horse sloshing through the mud of the yard, and she hoped and prayed he would get through.

Philip rode as he had never ridden before. His sister's life probably hung in the balance, and he mentally cursed Ghent who had brought this trouble to the Jordan home.

He soon reached the trail along the South Fork, and in a moment he was at the edge of the frail bridge that spanned it. The lightning flashed, the thunder rolled, and the rain

pounded against him and the horse, as he peered into the black waters which by now had overflowed the banks. A blinding flash revealed the bridge slowly swinging out into the stream, the end toward him having been washed loose from its fastenings.

It dropped and partially sank, and Philip figured it would be suicide to attempt the crossing with the stream at its present height. For a moment he hesitated, then turned and dashed back to the ranch house.

Polly had undressed Ruth and covered her warmly. Then she and Ghent could only wait and pray.

Ghent's keen ear detected the sound of approaching hoofs and he turned toward the door of the living room as Philip entered, his face ghastly and streaked with mud. He was breathless from his hard ride through the driving rain, but he managed to gasp out: "I can't get through. The bridge has been carried away!" Then with a hopeless gesture he cried: "What shall we do?"

"I'll get through, somehow," said Ghent quietly, as he reached for his hat. "Where is Newbury's place?"

“Cross the bridge,” replied Polly. “Go straight ahead to the big ruined adobe house, turn to the left there and climb the trail, keeping to the left at every turn. You can’t miss it.”

“I’ll find it!” flung back Ghent as he ran from the house.

Polly looked out of the living-room window, and as a flash of lightning illuminated the whole countryside, saw him ride swiftly away, spurring his horse against the storm.

It was but a short dash to the stream, and when Ghent saw that the opposite end of the bridge still hung in place he did not hesitate, but drove his horse into the swollen stream, and headed for the floating end of the bridge which slanted upward and away from him.

Once, twice, he headed the horse at the slippery surface, then at the third attempt the sharp hoofs dug into the soft boards and, slipping and sliding, Ghent reached the opposite end of the bridge and leaped to clear ground just as the last fastening of the bridge gave way and the structure floated downstream.

A steady climb after leaving the adobe ruin mentioned by Polly, and Ghent arrived at New-



A Metro-Goldwyn Picture.
"RUTH VANDER VEGH"

bury's cabin. Raising his voice above the howling of the storm, he called and Newbury appeared in the doorway, his Indian servant behind him.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"Ghent!" was the laconic answer. Then, without waiting, he continued: "Ruth needs a doctor mighty bad, right now. Get your things and come at once!"

"Right away, Ghent," answered Win, as he stepped back into the room and hastily gathered up his bags and raincoat, the Indian meanwhile dashing out and in a moment reappearing with a saddled horse. Ghent waited astride his own restless mount, which seemed to sense the situation as if impatient to be off.

Win ran out of the house and leaped on his horse. Then, as the Indian released his hold, he swung around and off in the direction Ghent had come.

Ghent halted him, saying: "We can't get through that way. The bridge is washed out. We'll have to go by the North Fork."

"Right!" said Win, as he swung his horse in the other direction, but the Indian grasped

the bridle and said: "No go North Fork! Catch hell. Cloudburst come sure!"

"Come on!" shouted Ghent impatiently. "We'll get through somehow!"

And over the protests of the Indian, Win joined Ghent and they headed for the North Fork at a gallop.

As they approached the river, it seemed that all the water in Arizona had centered there. It rolled down from the mountains and swept through the canyons as if they were giant troughs. Overhead, queer-shaped, purplish clouds were gathering. The rain came down more heavily, penetrating the raincoat Win wore and wetting him to the skin. Ghent was soaked, but he gloried in it. He was riding for the woman he loved—his wife, who even now was suffering on her bed of pain that a new life might come into being.

Wild thoughts went through Ghent's mind as he dashed along in advance of Win, the nose of the latter's mount right at his own horse's flank. He hoped it would be a boy; he wanted a boy. But more than anything, he wanted Ruth.

He glanced back once and saw Win, the ever-

present professional bag tightly gripped in one hand, head down over the horse's neck, riding like a jockey, and Ghent's heart warmed to him.

Higher and higher rose the water, for now they were dashing down the center of the bed of the North Fork, under ordinary circumstances a mere trickle of half-stagnant water but now a rushing torrent. On and on they rode, each flash of lightning revealing that they were getting nearer to their goal, and Ghent constantly urged his horse to greater speed.

Suddenly they plunged into deeper water, over the backs of the horses. The intensity of the downpour increased, and not far behind them they heard a roar which told them that the Indian had been right; they were in for a cloudburst.

On they went, now riding, now being dragged by the horses which were forced to swim to keep their heads above water. It was gruelling, but each man went ahead, for each was doing it for the woman he loved.

A blinding flash, a terrific clap of thunder, and the cloudburst was upon them. Ghent looked back over his shoulder, and saw a great

wall of water rushing down the canyon toward them. He hoped they could reach the clearing beyond the canyon, a few yards ahead, before they were engulfed. A cry from Win told him that the doctor's horse had stumbled and fallen, the rush of water tearing the bridle from Win's grasp. In a second Ghent had slid from his horse, and with a strength that surprised him literally hurled Win on the back of the steed. "Go on! Ride like hell! You can make it! You've got to make it, Newbury!" he shouted almost hysterically, and Win dashed ahead with as much speed as the swollen waters would permit.

Ghent turned and saw the great rushing wall of water almost upon him, and for the first time realized his peril. With his remaining strength, he fought his way across the stream and began to clamber up the steep bank, clutching at roots of shrubs which pulled out of the softened clay the moment his weight hung on them.

Up he went, little by little, the first onrush of water snarling at his heels; his fingers clutched a slippery rock where he hung by sheer strength. He turned his head and just

then another flash of lightning lit up the country for miles around, and he saw that Win had reached the clearing and was dashing madly across firm ground toward Ruth.

Ghent closed his eyes and breathed a prayer for her. Then the huge pillar of water picked him up and flung him away from the slippery clay wall. He felt the rushing waters carrying him on and on, whirling him like a small cork. Just before he lost consciousness he tried to laugh, but it stuck in his throat.

What was that coming towards him, big and black. . . . ? He was floating; he was up in the air. He heard the murmur of a babbling brook but still he floated. His head felt queer. It burned and it hurt. He put out his hand to steady himself; he did not like that floating around in space. He felt his hand grasped. That's funny, he thought . . . perhaps it is an angel . . . more likely the devil. . . . He tried to laugh, but his throat hurt. He heard voices and opened his eyes. He looked around . . . everything was blurred.

Then he again heard that murmur, but now it sounded like voices. He could not see any-

thing. His hand was still being held by a cool firm one.

Of a sudden it all came back to him, the rushing waters, the fight he and Win made to get to Ruth. . . . Ruth . . . he wondered how she was.

He sat up but it was with a great effort, and then his brain cleared a little and he was able to see he was in his own bed, and beside him was Lon, and holding his hand was Newbury, who smiled down on him as he tried to rise.

On Lon's face there was mingled joy and apprehension. He was glad to see the boss in his right mind again, but fearful lest the effort of sitting up would be too costly.

Ghent sat on the edge of the bed and tried to think clearly. How did he get here? What day was it? He wanted to ask a hundred questions, but he could not seem to frame them.

He squeezed the hand that held his and then patted it with his other one and, looking at Newbury, said: "Well . . . how . . ." But the effort was too much and he sank back weakly.

Win smiled and patted his shoulder and said: "Don't try to talk now. I'll explain everything to you."

Ghent looked up at him with a smile.

"Well," went on Win, "I guess I had better start at the beginning; after you put me on your horse."

"Start anywhere," interjected Ghent, trying to smile, "but start now."

"Of course, I got through all right. I was fifty yards away from the stream when the water finally rushed down, and I got to the ranch without mishap, but wet as the devil." And as he recalled his ride, he grinned.

"Polly and Philip were wringing their hands, not knowing what to do to help Ruth, who was at the height of her pains," he continued coolly, as if he were making a report on a case to a superior.

"I gave her something to quiet her, and in a little while it was all over . . . a seven-pound boy, it was . . . and I thought perhaps you would like to know that his name is Stephen Ghent, Jr." And Win smiled at Ghent.

"You don't really mean that she named him after me?" asked Ghent, incredulity in his voice.

"Certainly! Why not?" demanded Win. "He's your son, isn't he?"

"My son!" echoed Ghent, and he dwelt lovingly on the words.

"And to think he's a whole day old by now!" he went on.

"A whole day!" said Win in surprise. "A whole week you mean!"

"Week! Week!" exclaimed Ghent, not able to believe his ears.

"Why, certainly, a week!" answered Win. "You have been flat on your back here for a week, out of your mind most of the time, and I want to tell you, you owe your life to this fellow here." And he clapped Lon on the shoulder, causing him to scrape his foot in embarrassment.

"Tell me about that part of it," said Ghent huskily, as he smiled gratefully at Lon.

"After you were flung about by the waters that followed the cloudburst, you were thrown out high on the embankment. Your head struck a rock and there you lay," replied Win. Then with a smile at Lon, he continued: "Lon began to worry about you and went out to look you up. Here you are, so evidently he found you."

Told by Newbury, it sounded simple enough, but back of the words, Ghent could comprehend

the anxiety and the great regard Lon held for him. He held out his hand to the faithful fellow, who took it, his face crimson with embarrassment.

Quickly he hurried from the room, saying that he had to go down to the mine right away "to 'tend to s-s-some 'portant b-b-bus'ness."

Both men watched him as he went out the door. Then Win said: "I am glad he left us, for I want to say a few things to you that I think you would rather hear alone."

Then he said, abruptly: "Ghent, Ruth loves you."

Ghent stopped him with a gesture, a bitter smile lighting up his face. "No," he said. "She told me plainly that day . . . the day . . . that she wanted her freedom. . . ."

"Nonsense," retorted Win. "I was alone with her that night. In her delirium she kept calling your name faintly. I heard it over and over, always the same. . . . Stephen . . . Stephen . . . Stephen. . . . Probably I am exposing sick room secrets to tell you this, but I want her to be happy, Ghent, and if she wants you, I will do everything in my power to bring you together."

For several moments nothing was said by either man. Finally Ghent sat up with an effort. His eyes were tear-dimmed as he gazed at Newbury, and he said, huskily: "You love Ruth?" more a question than anything else, and he waited for the answer.

"Better than anything else in the world!" was Win's quick reply.

Ghent sought the young doctor's hand, and in a voice choked with emotion said, as he grasped it: "My God, but you're a man!"

Tears had welled up in Win's eyes, but he brushed them away as he went back to the subject, saying: "There is just one thing I want to add and that is, one week from to-day—you will be entirely well by then—I want you to come to the Jordan ranch at five in the afternoon—to see the baby," he added as an afterthought.

Ghent promised, and a short time later Win started toward the door. "Just one other thing, Ghent," he said, "I've brought that horse of yours back, the one that carried me to Ruth. Would you like to sell him? I have formed a great attachment for him."

"Neither you nor any one else can buy that

horse, Newbury. He isn't for sale at any price. But he's yours if you'll have him. Take him and may he always serve you as he did me that night," replied Ghent.

"Thanks, I accept him gladly, and will take the best of care of him; you may rest assured of that." And with a wave of his hand he was gone.

CHAPTER XXI

A WEEK is only seven days, of twenty-four hours each, but to Ghent, the week that followed the final visit of Dr. Win Newbury dragged by as though the very solar system was running down.

However, even the slowest week must come to an end sometime, and promptly at the appointed time, on the appointed day, Ghent stood in the yard of the Jordan ranch, waiting for Polly to signal him to come in and see his wife—and son.

In the living-room Ruth sat sewing near the table; across from her sat Philip. Near by stood Win Newbury and Polly.

“When will you have some sense, Ruth?” Philip was asking, evidently taking up a subject that had been under discussion.

“Never along the lines you mention, I guess,” replied Ruth quietly, without looking up from her sewing.

“Now, look here! Try to see this thing straight, will you?” said Philip, leaning for-

ward. "Stephen Ghent is your husband; he risked his life for you, and the least you can do is to see him and talk things over. I don't like him a little bit, but he's your husband and he's a man."

"I won't," replied Ruth with some heat. "I will not see him, so that settles that."

"Please, Ruth, you will listen to me, won't you?" said Win as he stepped nearer to her, and the girl nodded. "Well, then," he continued, "please see Ghent. He has a right to see his son, you know, and I want you to be big."

Slowly she shook her head, then replied: "No, Win, I cannot. Please do not ask me again."

With a sigh and a shrug of resignation, Newbury turned to Polly standing by the window and nodded. Polly at once waved her handkerchief.

"You are acting like an imbecile!" said Philip, disgustedly.

"Don't speak to me in that manner, Philip!" replied Ruth heatedly. "I am not your wife, you know."

"See! see!" burst from Polly, as she glanced

at Philip. "Everybody knows how you treat me."

Philip had no time to answer, for he heard Ghent's footsteps outside.

"Well, Ruth, he is here, and you must see him whether you want to or not." And with a quick movement he opened the door and Ghent stepped in.

He looked tired and worn and there was a freshly healed scar on his forehead, but in his eyes there was a wonderful light as he gazed at Ruth.

Her eyes blazed and she affected not to notice him, as Philip went to Ghent and offered his hand which the latter took and shook cordially.

Ghent nodded to Polly and Newbury in turn, then turned his gaze back to Ruth.

Philip, his patience utterly exhausted, turned away and paced up and down the room.

The tense silence was broken by Polly who said: "But, after all, Ruth, he is your husband."

Stung by this, Ruth suddenly arose and then, pointing her finger at Ghent, said in a low, hard voice, gazing into his eyes: "Do you know

how he became my husband? How he came here that night with two others—in pack, like a beast, a human beast. Do you know that they were going to gamble for my body, and to save myself from the others I gave myself to this. . . .” And she scornfully indicated Ghent, then stepped back from him as though fearful of defiling herself by contact with him.

“My God!” gasped Philip, “is this true?”

“Ask him,” replied Ruth, the others standing speechless.

Ghent said not a word. He merely stood with head bowed, shamed to his very soul.

Before any one could interfere had they even suspected his purpose, Philip dashed across the room, and from its place on the wall tore the heavy rifle. Then he whirled on Ghent, and fired.

That he missed was no fault of his, for he had intended to kill, but Ruth, who was nearest, knocked the barrel out of line and the bullet sped harmlessly over Ghent’s head.

Ghent had not moved; he would have welcomed death at that moment. Ruth struggled with Philip, finally quieted him, and motioned to Polly to take him from the room.

Protesting, Philip allowed himself to be led away. Then Win came slowly toward Ruth, who stood, a queer light in her eyes, looking down at the rifle which she had taken from Philip.

Stopping before the girl, Win said softly: "He loves you, Ruth, dearly. I know it. And he is a real man." And taking her hands in his, he held them for a moment, then went into the other room to join Polly and Philip.

With the others gone, reaction set in and Ruth sank weakly into a chair. For a few seconds, that seemed an eternity to Ghent, she held her face in her hands. When she looked up she was strangely calm. She gazed at Ghent and said:

"God forgive me . . . you never can . . . for telling. . . ."

"It was a pity," he answered, "but I drove you to it by coming here. You were in a corner."

"It was base of me . . . base," she replied. "I should not have done it."

He turned with his hat in his hand and started for the door. Just then from Ruth's bedroom there came a faint cry.

Ghent stopped in his tracks and looked longingly towards the bedroom door. Then with a tired smile, and with just the trace of a tear in his voice, he called softly: "Good-by, my son! Good-by, boy! God bless you!"

He turned back again to Ruth and said: "There is one thing you can never take from me, and that is the man you have made of me." She would have stopped him, but he went on: "I remember reading some years ago a sermon of some sort on 'The Second Birth.' I thought it was a lot of drivel, but, believe it or not, that sermon might have been written for me, and the man who wrote it might have been standing behind that door in the Judge's little house the night we were married, saying to the recording angel, 'That rascal there!'—meaning me—'Take notice! There isn't an ounce of bone or a drop of blood in him but what is new man!' "

"You think then," asked Ruth, "that the failure has been all mine?"

"There has been no failure," Ghent replied. "Some of it has been wrong, perhaps, but as a whole, it has been right. The first time our eyes met, they burned away all that was bad

in our meeting, and left only the fact that we had met . . . pure joy . . . enough for both . . . you will see it some day."

"I couldn't see it that way," went on the girl. "Another woman would have gone straight to her goal, but you found a woman who went about with the cry ringing in her ears day after day, 'Cleanse yourself'—and I did it the only way I knew."

She wiped her eyes and went on: "Our meeting brought out all that was strong and good in you, and all that was weak and mean in me, until I grew weak unto death."

Again the faint cry from the room beyond, and again Ghent's heart was pierced. But he turned slowly and started for the door.

Ruth gazed after him; the stoop to his shoulders, his big, brave, strong shoulders, hurt her a little. He went on; he was almost at the door when she spoke sharply, quickly, as if afraid he might not hear:

"Stephen!" And as he turned at the sound of his name, he saw her eyes glowing with a new light.

Quickly he came back to her, almost speechless, but he managed to stammer out:

“Ruth! you will let me help you to make a happy life for the little fellow?”

Slowly she nodded her head as she leaned toward him, and, as he drew her to him, there was no protest, but a gentle yielding as his strong arms held her close. Their lips met, and held . . . her eyes closed. She was extremely happy.

From the bedroom there came again the cry, this time louder and more insistent than before.

Gently Ruth withdrew from Ghent's embrace and said: “Come, Stephen, while I give Stephen Ghent, Jr., his supper. It's long past his time.”

They turned and slowly went towards the bedroom, each with an arm about the other.

As they reached the door Ruth stopped and, as Ghent turned towards her, she said:

“Stephen, can't you make a little happiness for us, too?”

Ghent nodded and again swept her into his arms, their lips met and held for a moment. Then they went into the bedroom—to their son.

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